



## Gender, Body and Writing in Ena Lucía Portela's “Una extraña entre las piedras”

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**ABSTRACT:** This article seeks to fill a gap in Cuban gender studies. The aim here is to explore, through Ena Lucía Portela's short story “Una extraña entre las piedras”, how intertextuality is used in recent Cuban lesbian narrative to challenge the monologic and homogeneous positions created in terms of post-revolutionary Cuban subjectivities. By inserting the feminine subjects within a transnational debate, this article claims that Portela will create a fluid identity within a context labelled by Portela herself as “pulp”, a heterogeneity framed by discourses that engage with postmodernism, and feminine writing. This article will prove that although the text itself attempts to defy the parameters of French feminists, it ends up representing them through a metanarrative process, which paradoxically places Portela at the forefront of new gender frameworks in Cuban studies, by giving visibility to the generally absent lesbian body.

**KEY WORDS:** Gender identity; Cuban literature; feminine writing; intertextuality; lesbian fiction; postmodernism; metafiction

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**RESUMEN:** *Género, cuerpo y escritura en “Una extraña entre las piedras” de Ena Lucía Portela.*- Este artículo procura llenar un vacío crítico en los estudios cubanos de género. El objetivo aquí es explorar, a través del relato “Una extraña entre las los piedras”, de Ena Lucía Portela, cómo la intertextualidad se usa en la reciente narrativa lésbica cubana para desafiar las posiciones monológicas y homogéneas creadas en términos de subjetividades cubanas postrevolucionarias. Mediante la inserción de sujetos femeninos dentro de un debate transnacional, este artículo afirma que Portela creará una identidad fluida dentro de un contexto etiquetado por Portela misma como “sustancia *pulp*”, una heterogeneidad enmarcada por discursos que abordan el postmodernismo y la escritura femenina. Este artículo demostrará que, aunque el texto en sí intenta desafiar los parámetros de las feministas francesas, termina por representarlos mediante un proceso metanarrativo que, paradójicamente, coloca a Portela en la vanguardia de nuevas estructuras de género en los estudios cubanos, al darle visibilidad al cuerpo lésbico, generalmente ausente.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Identidad de género; Literatura cubana; Literatura de mujeres; Intertextualidad; Narrativa lésbica; Postmodernismo; Metaficción

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In this article I shall analyse how gender, body and writing are interwoven in Ena Lucía Portela's dialogic short story "Una extraña entre las piedras" by means of an intertextual game. The narrator protagonist uses intertextuality to explore gender identity in a transnational setting between Cuba and New York, and to manipulate language in creative ways that will help her establish a feminine microcosm through a metanarrative process.

From the beginning of the short story we find a narrator who wants to tell us a story; thus questioning: "Según las circunstancias actuales, ¿sería adecuado comenzar diciendo que la bella Nepomorrosa trabajaba en una fábrica de lentejuelas?" (Portela, 1999: 91). Nepomorrosa is the second lover of the narrator protagonist. Here, Nepomorrosa's story will be an excuse so that the narrator can begin the narrative exercise, where writing itself will constitute the topic of the story, which begins with the birth of Nepomorrosa in the Dominican Republic and her death in New York.

The narrator of this story is Djuna, a Cuban lesbian writer who lives in New York and who is part of the Clan Campbell, a group of women friends (Sombra, Luzángela, Dalilah M. or "the Raspberry", and Nita). The narration revolves around the relations of the narrator, Djuna, with her friends and, especially, with her ex-partners in New York: Sombra, first, and then Nepomorrosa. Moreover, the story turns into a metanarrative where the protagonist comments on the text that we are reading and on the process of creation in general, as Djuna rewrites the birth of Nepomorrosa through Sombra's words. The dialogism of the text takes place when we hear the different narrative voices through Djuna's speech acts, as an elderly woman recalling a younger past. Hence the narrator establishes a link between past and present by stating that now she is speaking forty years later: "no me molesta ser ahora una gata vieja y flaca, a veces todavía extraño mi cuerpo de hace cuarenta años y tengo que vigilarme para no hacer demasiadas ridiculeces". (Portela, 1999: 107)

Memory will link the narrative voices as Djuna remembers the story of her relationship with Sombra and Nepomorrosa and recalls her reaction when her friend Luzángela had suggested dropping the idea of the writing process, since Sombra was the first to meet Nepomorrosa, when Sombra was her university teacher, and Sombra was the one who had shared her story with the rest of the Clan Campbell. Djuna will justify her reasoning thus:

Su juicio, sin embargo, no era del todo acertado. Y no porque yo lo diga, aquí y ahora. Han transcurrido más de cuarenta años y creo que cierto libro, cierto único libro quizás gelatinoso y espasmódico, me autoriza, en esta especie de breve memoria que intento hacer pasar por una fábula de amor, a hablar de lo que he sido —de

lo que he creído ser— sin necesidad de sonrojarme. No puedo negar que me agradaba el hecho de ser considerada una brujita, indeseable carne para la hoguera de las vanidades, por algunos seres que, en el estilo de los cortesanos de la reina Sofía Carlota de Prusia, me recordaban, mucho mejor que a Leibniz, que existe lo infinitamente pequeño. Así como hay alabanzas criminales, también hay desprecios que ennoblecen y el ego, quién lo duda, puede ser un animalejo bien raro. Por otra parte, añadió Luzángela, no estaba bien eso de robarle las historias a Sombrita.

Se hizo un silencio bastante espeso. Las historias no tienen dueño, recuerdo que dije, sin saber aún que nadie en el mundo se apropiaría de la bella Nepomorrosa tanto como yo. (Portela, 1999: 96–97)

The narrator seems to invite the reader to read between the lines through the uncertainty of the narrative process itself as she also uses the intertextuality with Sophia Charlotte of Hanover, Queen consort of Prussia, to parody knowing the infinitely small, in this case when facing her critics. Djuna focuses on dialogism itself by relating to the time of what is being narrated and the time of the writing. We are before an unreliable narrator who is providing an abridged memoir that she will try to pass as a "fábula de amor". By speaking of "lo que he sido" and "lo que he creído ser", the narrator will connect the essence of her writing with the construction of an individual identity. In doing so, she will rewrite her past and will recreate herself.

The name of the narrator, Djuna, is another dialogic strategy, an intertextual reference to the North American writer Djuna Barnes (1892–1982), known for her bisexuality and her book *Nightwood*, published in 1936, one of the first books to explicitly portray a homosexual subject, with whom the narrator of this story identifies. This intertextual reference delineates the protagonist's profile: she is a writer, dresses in drag and she is a lesbian.

On a first reading, the narrative voice could be seen as always marginal, moving in the narrative interstices. However, I posit that Portela creates concentric circles and what seems "marginal" shares a common centre; thus we find that her narrative voices can move from what could be seen as marginal (and I would call "other") to the centre. Portela develops her narrator as an "in-between" character, fluid, whose dialogic narrative and narrative games acquire significance. Her narrator thus subverts any monological, authoritarian, dogmatic position, particularly in terms of gender and national identity. This is the "in-between" character that Eliana Rivero, in another context, documents in her study of the Cuban diaspora when referring to "interstitial identities" as one of the terms that "allow us to rethink place and displacement in terms of identity" (Rivero, 2005: 39). Hence, this fluidity of the protagonist challenges any stable notion

of national, individual or sexual identity: Djuna is neither Cuban nor American and she is both simultaneously; and she dresses herself as a man to emphasize both her masculine and feminine features. Identity appears as a cultural construct, and the narrator is constantly challenging and redefining it. Any attempt to arrive at an ultimate signified concerning both the narrator and the story itself will be defied through the narrative process.

From the beginning of the story, Portela establishes a clear contrast between "dialogic" Djuna and her lover, "monologic" Sombra:

Por aquellos días yo amaba y odiaba a Sombra, una gran señora pequeña. Sí, era bien chiquita, como la mayoría de las personas que, según Remarque, tienden a causar problemas. Por su edad, bien hubiera podido ser mi abuela, mi Saethel [...]. Fue una mujer cristalina, frágil, delicada al extremo de inspirar crueldades, y no por eso menos déspota y necesitada del poder que implica ser el centro de un grupo. [...] Tenía cara de gato, como Henry Ford. Capaz de desplegar una increíble energía, arrastraba consigo las debilidades y grandezas propias de los líderes. Para alguien tan de la niebla, tan al margen de la Causa como yo, era imposible no amarla. Por lo menos era lo que yo creía. (Portela, 1999: 98)

The contrast can not be more obvious. Djuna is portrayed as the undefined, intangible fog, in contra-position with Sombra, projected as left-wing, politically dogmatic and a monologic character devoted to the "Cause":

Sombra inspiraba a muchas personas algo parecido al miedo. Además de ser una feminista radical y de poseer un extraordinario, yo diría que hasta susceptible, sentido de la dignidad *gay*, era una de esas mentalidades totalitarias que temen a la risa, las parodias, la ironía, la retórica negra y los juegos de palabras, a los contrastes hiperrealistas con el fin en sí mismos que, como fotos de pasaporte ampliadas hasta el desastre, suele producir la sustancia *pulp*. De alguna manera siempre se las arreglaba para ordenar, para idealizar, para producir un signo absoluto y completamente ineficaz. (Portela, 1999: 94)

Hence, Sombra embodies the monologic character par excellence, "el signo absoluto" that is opposed and is subverted by everything that the story in itself represents; that is, the text establishes a dichotomy between the monologic character of Sombra and the polyphony and dialogism of the text—a dialogism that is also created through the use of the polyphony of voices, humour and irony, part of what the narrator identifies as the characteristic heterogeneity in terms of dialogism, feminine writing and postmodernism that constitute what she calls "sustancia *pulp*".

In terms of dialogism, the "sustancia *pulp*" in "Una extraña entre las piedras" is expressed by means of a narration full of black humour, parody, irony, and puns. In relation to the characters this dialogism will be explored in the narrative through a hierarchical order that recalls Bakhtinian thought. As Pam Morris says when she refers to the Bakhtinian theory of dialogism, and that I extrapolate to this story: "Any ruling class will attempt to monologize the word, imposing an eternal single meaning upon it, but a living ideological sign is always dialogic. Any word can be re-accentuated—a curse can be spoken as a word of praise—and any word can provoke its counter-word" (Morris, 1994: 13). By exploiting the monologism of Sombra and the dialogism of Djuna and of the narrative itself, Portela is thus putting at play the centripetal force of discourse and the centrifugal challenges of various speech acts. As Morris states, for Bakhtin:

Within language there is always at work a centripetal force which aims at centralizing and unifying meaning. Without this impulse the shared basis of understanding necessary for social life would disintegrate. This centripetal force in discourse is put to use by any dominant social group to impose its own monologic, unitary perceptions of truth. However, always working against that centralizing process is a centrifugal force—the force of heteroglossia—which stratifies and fragments ideological thought into multiple views of the world. (Morris, 1994: 15)

In short, against the monologic speech acts of Sombra, the narrator will deploy the centrifugal force of her narration. While Sombra uses the concepts of feminism and gay pride in a monologic way, the narrator will use them to participate in a wider conflictual debate, that of feminine writing and the lesbian gaze.

Djuna also introduces herself as an "in-between" subject when she asserts her condition as a foreigner:

También en New York ("una ciudad muy querida para mí y que me encantaría compartir contigo", decía Sombra en una de sus cartas), la ansiada, la tremebunda, la mítica, la incomparable Capital del Mundo, allí donde viajar es una redundancia—supongo que semejante paisaje delata sin remedio mi condición de extranjera y no es que quiera compararme con Julia Kristeva—, se podía ser muy infeliz. No con la manera propia de sufrir de los norteamericanos, esa que según Albee, otro *assertive*, pertenece sólo a su tierra, sino con una infelicidad otra, mucho más impersonal, inefable, anónima. La misma que sentí una nebulosa tarde casi noche en el aeropuerto de Newark, en New Jersey, donde, según lo acordado, nadie me esperaba. Sombra andaba formando líos allá por Nicaragua—ella detestaba a la señora Violeta Barrios— y aún no éramos amantes.

[...]. Aterricé todavía aturdida por la cuaresma y el viento sur de mi país, por el estigma de una resolana que estaba a punto de volverme loca y bastante debilitada por una hemorragia incontenible. No tenía problemas políticos ni económicos demasiado serios; en realidad no tenía problemas, acababa de cumplir la mayoría de edad y emigraba como los pájaros, por razones de clima. No conocía aún, pobre de mí, los rigores del verano newyorkino y de la nieve. (Portela, 1999: 99)

The intertextual reference here alludes to the work of Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), where Kristeva affirms that: “The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises, and he disappears when we all acknowledge ourselves as foreigners, unamenable to bonds and communities” (Kristeva, 1991: 1). Djuna echoes this feeling in the short story when she expresses her constant unhappiness, her constant feeling of being out of place; she feels different. As the title of the short story confirms: she is “una extraña entre las piedras”, a significant intertextual title, a topic to which I shall return in this study.

Denying the comparison with Kristeva, Djuna actually establishes it by means of the intertextuality. Djuna also establishes a dialogue with the theory of Julia Kristeva, since the latter also asks herself: “Can one be a foreigner and happy?” (Kristeva, 1991: 4), a question that Kristeva elucidates thus:

The foreigner calls forth a new idea of happiness. Between the fugue and the origin: a fragile limit, a temporary homeostasis. Posited, present, sometimes certain, that happiness knows nevertheless that it is passing by, like fire that shines only because it consumes. The strange happiness of the foreigner consists in maintaining that fleeing eternity or that perpetual transience. (Kristeva, 1991: 4)

Therefore, following Kristeva, we could claim that the unhappiness of the protagonist is “más impersonal, inefable, anónima”, as quoted above.

On the other hand, the other intertextual reference above leads us to the North American playwright Edward F. Albee, and his protagonists in constant search for happiness. In contrast to her previous stories, Portela places her narrator not in Cuba, but out of the island, in an effort to distance this story from the socio-political reality of her country. Moreover, Portela wants to eliminate any possible reading of Djuna as a Cuban exile when the protagonist denies having political problems in her country and when she compares herself with a migratory bird. This story can be considered thus, an exploration of the condition of the migrant in a universal context. The narrator seems to link migration with fragmentation, unhappiness and nostalgia, although her condition as a migrant seems perfect for the creative process that she pursues in

this narrative. The use of the image of the bird as metaphor of the migrant also acquires more than one signified since “pájaro” is also a term that Cubans use to refer to homosexuals, even if limited to men. The narrator is both a migrant and a lesbian, and she identifies herself with “los pájaros”, even if the context reaffirms the “migratory birds”.

The reference to Sombra in Nicaragua, above, also helps us situate Sombra within an ideological context, also helping the reader in the temporal setting of the story around the time when Violeta Barrios de Chamorro unseated Daniel Ortega after winning the Nicaraguan elections, which put her in power in 1990, until she left office in January 1997; so, with this intertextual allusion the narrator places the story within the 1990s. Portela, however, on having established the time frame of the story in the New York of the 1990s, avoids any allusion to the Special Period in Cuba. The only moment in the story in which we can glimpse a light political criticism in between the lines is when Djuna comments:

Hablando de fumar, una vez estuve en Washington. [...] Allí me invitaron a una actividad cultural en la Oficina de Intereses de mi país y luego a una fiesta en la residencia del embajador, porque yo no me metía en política y eso había que premiarlo de alguna manera, supongo. Por esos días solía gritarse mucho frente a la sede de la ONU y en la parada del 20 de Mayo, que es el día de una república que no llegué a conocer; muchos de mis compatriotas vivían aún en los años cincuenta, mientras otros manifestantes se plantaban frente a la Casa Blanca a exigir todo tipo de cosas en los más diversos idiomas y agitando las más diversas banderas mientras el presidente demócrata daba una vuelta por América Latina no recuerdo para qué. El señor embajador me dijo aquella vez que yo era una señorita muy elegante (mi traje se parecía bastante al suyo) y me regaló una rueda entera de H. Upmann [...]. También me dijo que allí sí se podía fumar, porque aquel recinto era algo así como el templo de la única democracia verdadera. (Portela, 1999: 109)

In the previous quotation the protagonist highlights the role of the US in the so-called “Cuban independence” marked on the 20th of May 1902, which for many in revolutionary Cuba would still mark a limited independence, attached to US interests. The protagonist thus denies, in a rather revolutionary vein, that such a republic actually exists, or at least she confirms that she did not get to know it as such. Moreover, the affirmation of the ambassador on “el templo de la única democracia verdadera” questions the possibility of a “democracy” anywhere, thus tangentially mobilizing the debate between Cuba-US relations around the topic of “democracy” and highlighting the fact that there is no Embassy, but just a Cuban Interests Section in the US, and the actual lack of diplomatic relations, while she seems



to be rewarded for keeping within the margins of the Cuban exile community in the US.

The narrator also shows us this state of "in-betweenness" as a foreigner with the most important intertextual reference: the poem "Para Ana Veldford", by Lourdes Casal (1938-81), which as I shall document below provides the title to this story and is a topic to which I promised to return. This intertextuality appears in one of the culminating moments of the story, almost at the end of it, when the protagonist breaks her relationship with Sombra, a moment when Djuna further confirms Sombra's monologism and distaste for the heterogeneity of "la sustancia *pulp*". Djuna expresses it thus:

(yo sentía tanta repulsión por el apio como ella por la sustancia *pulp*) [...] y sus rollos políticos que nunca entendí del todo y que traducían en señales represivas y castrantes —esta palabra también le molestaba por la insidiosa asociación que establecía, según ella, entre el espíritu y la virilidad.

[...] el cansancio integral de aquellos días me impedía acercarme a ella y a su apego desmesurado y ciego a las convenciones de la tribu "izquierdista" y clase media donde siempre permanecí como "una extraña entre las piedras, aún bajo el sol amable de este día de verano, \ (sic) como ya para siempre permaneceré extranjera, \ aún cuando regrese a la ciudad de mi infancia, \ cargo esta marginalidad inmune a todos los retornos", como dice Lourdes Casal en *Para Ana Veldford*. (Portela, 1999: 117–18)

Here Portela is clearly dialoguing with the version of Lourdes Casal's poem "Para Ana Veldford" published in *Palabras juntan revolución*, by Casa de las Américas in 1981, which was first published in the journal *Areíto* in the summer of 1976 under the title "Para Ana Veldford", concerning the referent Anna Veldford. In the poem, Casal states:

Pero Nueva York no fue la ciudad de mi infancia,  
no fue aquí que adquirí las primeras certidumbres,  
no está aquí el rincón de mi primera caída,  
ni el silbido lacerante que marcaba las noches.  
Por eso siempre permaneceré al margen,  
una extraña entre las piedras,  
[...].  
Cargo esta marginalidad inmune a todos los retornos,  
demasiado habanera para ser neoyorkina,  
demasiado neoyorkina para ser,  
—aún volver a ser—  
cualquier otra cosa.  
(Casal, 1976: 52; Casal, 1981: 60–61)

Lourdes Casal's poem acquires different connotations in the context of Portela's story. The intertextual dialogue established between the two texts opens up the latter to different levels of readings, including the possibility of interpreting Djuna's role

in the story as an alter ego of Lourdes Casal's poetic subject. The word becomes a plurivalent sign. As Bakhtin claims, the word is never neutral, that is:

When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others' voices. No, he receives the word from another's voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited. Therefore the orientation of a word among words, the varying perception of another's word and the various means for reacting to it, are perhaps the most fundamental problems for the metalinguistic study of any kind of discourse, including the artistic. (Bakhtin, 1984: 202)

Portela's words and title of the story come charged with Casal's own position in the poem and her own subjectivity as a lesbian, transnational Cuban writer. On the one hand, Casal's poetry is selectively quoted by Portela to underline the narrator's alienation from the "tribu izquierdista y clase media", which could even allude to Casal herself. On the other hand, bearing in mind the excellent study on Casal's poem, entitled "En busca de la 'Ana Veldford' de Lourdes Casal: exilio, sexualidad y cubanía", written by Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, the title of Casal's poem is not only a tribute to Lourdes Casal herself (who represented a transnational diasporic subject, who seemed ill at ease in the context of migrating to the US in 1962, and was unusual, at the time, in establishing links with revolutionary Cuba as early as 1973, also as a founding member of *Areíto* and as part of the *dialogueros*, exiles who established "dialogues" with the Cuban government in 1978, and died an untimely death whilst in Cuba in 1981), but it also constitutes "el reconocimiento más explícito —aunque no fuera voluntario— que Casal les legó a sus lectores para revelarles su sexualidad" (Martínez San-Miguel and Negrón-Muntaner, 2006: 179). German-born Anna Veldford, the true referent of the poem (with this spelling of the name, as opposed to the spelling in the poem), was a foreigner in Cuba, who suffered repression for openly being a lesbian; she ultimately settled in New York in 1972. According to Martínez-San Miguel and Negrón-Muntaner, Lourdes Casal was "a closet lesbian" and thus her sexuality did not become an issue in Cuba, but her poem's title, according to them, reveals her sexual identity. Therefore, it is not arbitrary that Djuna, the narrator of Portela's story, through the use of this intertextuality, inserts herself within the discourse of the lesbian who becomes the embodiment of the transnational character. Djuna suffers

a triple alienation from mainstream Western society (represented by New York), for being a foreigner (neither totally Cuban nor fully American), for being a woman (but dressed as a man) and a lesbian (both loving the lesbian Sombra and the “heterosexual” Nepomorrosa who turned gay after meeting Djuna). It is only through Djuna’s writing that we can listen to her voice, which occupies in turn the centre of the discourse, since she is the producer of it. This discourse is also full of traces of its in-betweenness in terms of language, as it is permeated with words in English; the narrator is unable to fully express herself using only her Spanish.

Although the protagonist of Portela’s story shows openly her sexuality, both Djuna and Lourdes Casal, as well as Anna Veltfort, suffer for their sexuality and for their condition as foreigners. The protagonist will also identify herself with the whole universal community of migrants; hence she also identifies herself with “el protagonista de la novela *América*” (Portela, 1999: 101), an intertextual reference to the protagonist of the novel *Amerika* written by Kafka, and whose protagonist Karl Rossmann has to emigrate to the United States where he will live through the most diverse and strange incidents. Djuna’s marginality is also revealed in her relationship with Sombra:

Me hubiera gustado contarle todo eso a Sombra, decirle que me sentía extraña y pedirle ayuda, cualquier clase de ayuda. No era cómodo sentirse extraña, incapaz de pertenecer, sobre todo cuando la diferencia (todavía ignoro en qué radicaba la diferencia, tal vez era sólo una sensación, una abrumadora sensación que ahora parece volver) parecía transformarse en peligro, en amenaza. Pero sabía que ella me escucharía tanto como el presidente demócrata a los manifestantes variopintos. Me había acostumbrado a que ella no aceptara entrar en el espacio, no sé si bueno o malo, que yo le proponía. Era un espacio demasiado privado, demasiado ajeno a la Causa y a sus *slogans*. De algún modo, quizás triste, conforme y hasta miserable, me gustaba gustarle así, desde afuera. [...] Sombra recortaba mi pluralidad para apropiarse de los fragmentos que le eran más afines, de los retazos que no le hacían daño. Me exhibía —le encantaba arrastrarme a sus fiestas, a algún que otro *brunch* sólo para mujeres, y que yo la besara en la boca delante de las otras—, me coleccionaba igual que a un perro de raza, un dálmata de esos que, a partir primero de Disney y luego de Glenn Close, se habían vuelto muy populares. Yo, su trofeo, la demostración más irrefutable de su prestigio en nuestra comunidad, sabía que no podía esperar mucho más de ella. “No hacemos lo que queremos, sino lo que podemos, somos imperfectos y no por ello culpables”, me repetía día tras día a mí misma (sin creerlo del todo) para no sentirme tan fuera de lugar, tan descolocada, tan inexistente. Nunca antes me habían tocado tan de cerca el malentendido

y el desencuentro, tal vez porque nunca antes había hecho planes con nadie. (Portela, 1999: 110–11)

Again, the opposition Djuna/Sombra is established. Djuna belongs to the private space of writing, whereas Sombra belongs to the public sphere of politics. Djuna appears as a plural, fragmented being, whereas Sombra as a monolithic character, who does not change; she does not develop along the narration. In the previous quotation we can see clearly the performative nature of their relationship. Here the narrator appears objectified in the same way as the patriarchal order objectifies women. Therefore, although this story is written from a feminine homosexual perspective, the homosexual relationship described does not appear as a solution to the problem of the feminine repression or effacement inside the patriarchal system. The relationships continue to be described as power relationships.

One of the features that define the protagonist is her gaze, which is going to be present and is going to serve as leitmotif throughout the story. This gaze will turn into a plurivalent sign that will define the protagonist. The protagonist affirms “tengo los ojos grandes, negros e indiscretos, y de joven siempre tuve que usar espejuelos oscuros para que no me adivinaran los pensamientos” (Portela, 1999: 120). In this context, the gaze becomes the way of gaining access to the subjectivity of the protagonist. Nevertheless, inside the context of the big city the narrator explains:

La gente era interesante. (En Nueva York es raro que te miren a los ojos, que te miren incluso, creo que sólo algunos hispanos lo hacen y fue así como la Mirada llegó a convertirse para mí en el más preciado de los bienes). Me gustaba fabular. Inventar pasados, vaticinar futuros. Me sentaba entre los *homeless*, o entre los drogadictos baratos que se pinchaban en cualquier esquina como los personajes grotescos de Bacon o los dibujos obscenos de los baños que imitaba De Kooning; o entre los nuevos *hippies*, muchachos y muchachas europeos, con dinero y sin ideales [...]. Por lo general se trataba de personas inofensivas y silenciosas, pero lo cierto es que yo prefería casi siempre andar sola; por nada del mundo me metía en una disco o en una barra *gay*. No quería tomar una pastillita, como recomienda Kurt Vonnegut, porque las pastillitas, incluso los analgésicos, siempre me han inspirado una profunda desconfianza. Tampoco quería enredarme en ninguna clase de terapia, porque veía que las personas a mi alrededor regresaban de la terapia mucho más desequilibradas que antes. Ese era mi lado Salinger. Me molestaba que en casi todos los lugares públicos estuviera prohibido fumar. (Portela, 1999: 108)

The gaze appears here as a sign found in the Hispanic community, as a feature that sets

Hispanics apart in New York. The gaze also appears like the most valued good of the writer-protagonist; it is what connects her to the world. It is through this contact with the world that the protagonist can create ("fabular" and "inventar pasados, vaticinar futuros"); it is thus that she can be a writer. However, despite this contact, the protagonist continues to categorically assert her individuality within the whole community. Djuna inhabits marginal spaces full of marginal people, whilst rejecting what she considers a ghetto, a gay bar; at the same time, she also refuses any type of artificial introspection, like the use of psychoanalysis or of drugs. The mention of the North American writer Kurt Vonnegut and "las pastillitas" is full of irony and black humour, since Vonnegut's mother had committed suicide with sleeping pills and he himself had tried to commit suicide with pills and alcohol in 1984, a fact about which he would write later on. The gaze also is extremely important when the protagonist, voyeur par excellence, has sex with Sombra:

Y hubo algo más. Algo muy bonito, creo. La primera vez que Sombra y yo hicimos el amor, ella, haciendo honor a su nombre, dudó por un breve y vertiginoso instante cuando le hablé de la posibilidad de encender al menos una lucecita. A mí me encantaba mirar y ser mirada. Sombra, a pesar de toda la parafernalia feminista en el sentido de que todas las mujeres eran bellas sólo por ser mujeres, de que los estereotipos glamorosos, ya fuera el sensual —Laís—, el etéreo —Nepomorrosa, toda una figurita—, o el deportivo —yo misma, si bien nunca me consideré lo que se dice linda, pues prefería llevar el pelo corto y vestirme en el departamento de caballeros, "en tu caso, Djuna", opinaban Nita y el Clan Campbell, "en tu caso no se dice *pretty*, no es adecuado, se dice *handsome*" —, no eran más que instrumentos de la opresión sexista, censurables incluso en un travesti descarado de esos que imitan a Sharon Stone porque no tenían nada en que entretenerse, a pesar, en fin, de su complicada ideología, Sombra tuvo miedo de mi reacción ante los estragos que el tiempo había ocasionado en su cuerpo. ¿Qué podía yo, tan parecida a un muchacho, tan ortodoxa en cierto sentido (nunca me acosté con hombres), y sobre todo, tan joven, tan impetuosamente joven, qué podía yo entender de partos difíciles, de cicatrices? Pero no había nada que entender, ni por un momento tuve que ser generosa. La deseé tal como era. Y la deseé mucho, casi con dolor. La deseé incluso cuando dejé de amarla, cuando por fin nos separamos. Con ese gesto que ella nunca admitiría, Sombra consiguió derretir el hielo que todas decían que había dentro de mí. Hasta llegué a pensar que sería para siempre. (Portela, 1999: 102–03)

Here we can see the importance of the homosexual body and the rejection of any label that tries to define women in monolithic and monologic terms.

These labels appear as constructions of the patriarchal order. Djuna appears as both subject and object of the gay gaze. And although the protagonist is also a transvestite, dressed up as a man, in the previous quotation there is a critique of those transvestites that try to copy and to repeat the models of femininity established by patriarchal society. Once again, an opposition is established between the body of Djuna and that of Sombra; the latter has suffered the rigours of maternity. The gaze turns thus into the vehicle of desire, and language has to be adapted to reflect the protagonist's condition (thus "handsome" rather than "pretty", as quoted above).

It does not take us by surprise the fact that throughout the short story the protagonist is referring constantly to her pictures and documents. The diegesis of the story is abundantly splashed with intertextual references to existing paintings or photographs, which act as paratextual referents. Here the feminine gaze of the narrator must be maintained, rather than refrained, to look at the photos, paintings, and other inhabitants of the city, which ultimately constitute the genesis of the story. The marginal gaze of the transnational, lesbian narrator finds its centre only through the writing process. Thus, for example, the narrator affirms that:

En realidad, Sombra y yo nunca nos entendimos mucho. De sus dos actos más elegantes en relación conmigo, el primero, en orden cronológico, consistió en obsequiarme una reproducción de *El mundo de Cristina* (que aún conservo), con tal de que yo abandonara mi nada aconsejable proyecto de perpetrar un latrocinio en el Museo de Arte Moderno, a donde asistí todos los días durante algún tiempo, si bien por aquel entonces el oscuro objeto de mi deseo era Man Ray con esa acróbata que se acompaña por sus propias sombras. Lo cierto es que *El mundo de Cristina* resulta un cuadro bien sedante, el perfecto, si se viene a ver, para tranquilizar a los locos arrebatados que se apasionan más de la cuenta con los fantasmas de las vanguardias y sus efusiones líricas.

El segundo acto, mucho menos apacible, pero también con efectos terapéuticos, consistió en apuntarme con un arma. Con un revólver de calibre diminuto, pero revólver al fin. Una escena digna de *Johnny Guitar*. No recuerdo bien sus motivos, es probable que Laís me hubiese deslumbrado por su fulminante parecido con Jessica Rabbit. Siempre fui sensible a los dibujos animados. Como diría Valmont, "me es incontrolable". Y yo tenía que hacer, por otra parte, mi papel de mujer. Si todo el mundo se enteraba de que yo había despreciado a semejante diosa por el cuento ese de la fidelidad, ¿qué iban a pensar de mí? Por lo menos iba a tener que mudarme de barrio. (Portela, 1999: 101–02)

*El mundo de Cristina* is a painting by Andrew Wyeth, that far from being relaxing, tries to create



an effect of uneasiness, since Cristina is a disabled girl that crawls along a field and seems to be unable to reach the houses that are seen far away. In the passage just quoted above the narrator appropriates the masculine patriarchal language to parody it, and thus echoes the stereotypes of the promiscuous gay and that of the Hispanic macho, who feeling coerced by social pressures must give into the performance of masculinity. Nevertheless, the narrator subverts the rules of patriarchal order when a feminine lesbian subject is the producer of such speech. Furthermore, Djuna ironically identifies with the Vicomte de Valmont (a clear embodiment of masculinity and seduction), thus mocking the concept of a couple of the same sex behaving and following the traditional parameters of behaviour of a heterosexual couple. The last scene acquires a lighthearted and cartoonish tone. We must bear in mind that the narrator protagonist dresses herself as a man. However, the narrator, after Sombra's threat, states: "no me hubiera gustado aparecer en las sangrientas noticias de *Primer Impacto*, le dije, al menos no como víctima" (Portela, 1999: 102). The intertextual references are again visual, be they through the reference to the sensationalist US-based Spanish-language TV programme *Primer Impacto* or to *Johnny Guitar*, the 1954 Western that serves as a referent for the narrator to highlight with humour the violence of the scene being recalled. Likewise, through the reference to the voluptuous Jessica Rabbit, the cartoon character in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1988), Djuna's speech acts focus on sensuality and femininity. The intertextual game produces in this case a humorous effect and a parody of the patriarchal discourse, at the same time as she indirectly alludes to a reason for Sombra's own name, by making reference to her admiration for Man Ray's 1916 painting *The Rope Dancer Accompanies Herself with Her Shadows*, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "esa acróbata que se acompaña por sus propias sombras". This acrobat, in turn, mobilizes a figure that has occupied centre stage in post-revolutionary poetry, the tightrope walker, "el equilibrista". Sombra is thus a shadow cast from Djuna herself, since we get to know Sombra through Djuna's point of view and her speech acts. Through the representation of the migrant, lesbian body in New York, Portela provides a balancing act in a dialogic game of female subjectivity, as the body must negotiate its space in the city as well.

Within this framework of subjectivity and space, the renegotiations are established through metanarrative and intertextuality. From the beginning of "Una extraña entre las piedras" the story turns into metafiction:

Como era de esperar, alguien comentó que a partir de la bella Nepomorrosa —por aquel entonces no sabíamos que era bella—, con su nombrecito y su empleo

y alguna otra extravagancia por el estilo, como las muñecas vestidas de lentejuelas que inundaban el baño de Sombra, se podía escribir una historia entretenida, pintoresca, un poco a lo real maravilloso pasado por agua como ese líquido insulso e indecente que los americanos llaman *coffee*. A pesar de todo, pensábamos, era posible que nuestro *coffee*, con la debida publicidad, llegara a convertirse en un *best seller* y quizás hasta consiguiera interesar a algún productor. A la manera de Isabel Allende, recuerdo que pensé con un escalofrío que todavía no se me pasa. (Portela, 1999: 91–92)

In this case, the story reflects on the keys to success and the needs of the publishing and cinematographic market. In the previous paragraph there is a somewhat veiled, and ironic critique of commercial literature and commercial strategies that encourage certain literary trends such as "lo real maravilloso". The protagonist seems to see in Isabel Allende a personification of this commercial literature. However, at the same time, the story alludes to the "marvelous" links that can be established by not being tied down to a European logic, as Carpentier (1949) would have us believe in the context of his text *El reino de este mundo* and in relation to *lo real maravilloso*. Furthermore, Djuna would also affirm through the narrative that she has published a commercial book, which was also turned into a film.

Both the birth and the death of Nepomorrosa are narrated using black humour, as a parody of the serious and plausible discourse characteristic of biographies. The birth of Nepomorrosa turns out to be described along with a movie of Polanski, and there is an extra literary reference to the murder of Polanski's wife and his guests, which actually took place in 1969. The intertextuality in this case serves to erase the limits between fiction and reality, at the same time as it provides a temporary frame for the story, which connects the 1960s with the 1990s and beyond, with reference to a futuristic "forty years later". There is a constant fluidity of time in the narration. It is through the use of intertextuality that the reader confirms that the scene does not have the seriousness of official discourses, and instead uses humour as a subversive mechanism. Taking all this into account serves to situate the genesis of this short story at the time of Nepomorrosa's birth, when Djuna says:

Como solía suceder cada vez que hablaban en mi presencia de lo que "se vende" y lo que "no se vende", aunque fuera de un modo tangencial y nada obsesivo, como jugando a ser pragmáticas, a partir de ese instante casi nada logró conmoverme. Ni siquiera la evocación de cierto día grandioso hacia finales de los sesenta (¿o principios de los setenta?), cuando algo más o menos truculento sucedió con la esposa de Polanski y sus invitados, algo parecido a las películas mismas de Polanski —a quien prefiero todavía como a nadie—, mientras, en un perdido y no muy



caudaloso río de República Dominicana, nacía, al mismo tiempo (tanto así, que las bandas sonoras de ambos sucesos llegaron a fundirse en un mismo y espeluznante susurro), la bella Nepomorrosa.

La corriente, decía Sombra con su voz cansada y hermosa, la había arrastrado un centenar de metros o algo así, arrojándola una y otra vez contra las chinias y los bejucos, mínimos arrecifes imprescindibles en esta clase de escenografías intrépidas. Bueno, si bien las palabras de Sombra no fueron *exactamente* estas (no era su estilo), la cuestión es que la bella Nepomorrosa, personaje del agua, abrió bien pronto sus ojos a los peligros e incertidumbres que el azar —o lo que fuere— habría de prodigarle por el resto de sus días, persiguiéndola hasta el deslucido cuchitril que veintidós años más tarde, como en los cuentos de O. Henry, rentaría en la zona más deprimente de Queens. Allí donde, a partir de cierta hora, se aposenta en la entrada del *subway* un copioso rebaño de policías con el entrecejo fruncido. (Portela, 1999: 92)

Nepomorrosa's birth and her accidental death, electrocuted in the bathtub, provide the perfect opportunity in the first three pages of the text to reflect on the life-changing minute details. Djuna describes it thus:

Una vida llena de contratiempos la suya. Plena de sentidos perversos y de pequeños errores imperdonables. Sólo ella podía, por ejemplo, caerse dentro de la bañera llena de agua —*forever* el agua— junto a la secadora de pelo encendida. Al menos es eso lo que me han explicado y lo que todavía no consigo entender. ¿Quién le dijo que anduviera haciendo acrobacias, eh? ¿Y yo, dónde estaba yo? Sólo recuerdo que salí a vigilar no sé qué en la tienda de antigüedades y cosas raras de Madame Vigny [...] y que después encontré el apartamento inundado y lleno de gente. Policías, paramédicos, periodistas incluso. (Portela, 1999: 93)

Portela subverts the possibility of having a God-like, omniscient and objective narrator by having Djuna supposedly transcribe Sombra's words, thus manipulating the story. Through a Barthesian reading, we could claim that "Una extraña entre las piedras" participates in the theoretical "death of the author", creating a fluidity of signifieds, since: "[Literature] by refusing to assign a 'secret', an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases – reason, science, law" (Barthes, 1977: 147). This freedom to signify is expressed in the story by focusing outside the political monologic Cuban debates, be they on the island or in exile. At the same time, the narrator of this story

is not a trustworthy narrator and does not provide a unified meaning to the story. The birth and death of Nepomorrosa go hand in hand in the story when the narrator declares:

Con toda la vehemencia y la impenitente estupidez de mis veinticinco años (un cuarto de siglo me parecía entonces la gran cosa), me propuse de inmediato para poner en blanco y negro la historia de la bella Nepomorrosa. ¿Cómo prever el futuro? ¿Cómo imaginar mi propio papel en esa historia transparente y deshilachada que ya no podré contar? (Portela, 1999: 94)

The process of writing is closely linked with Nepomorrosa's life and, therefore, the narrator becomes also a character of her own story when she becomes Nepomorrosa's lover. Once again, we find the fluidity of the time frame of the story that helps us to compare a previously planned (when she was twenty five years old) black and white story with an "historia transparente y deshilachada". Because Nepomorrosa has passed away, Djuna claims, at the beginning of the narration, that this is a story "que ya no podré contar". However, the process of writing continues and becomes, as already mentioned, a metanarrative. Nepomorrosa does not need to be alive, since she is a literary excuse for the narration to exist on its own. According to Djuna:

Según Luzángela, quien a mis espaldas (no faltaba más), solía dedicarse al sano ejercicio de especular —como Luce Irigaray en sus malos momentos— lacanianamente acerca de mis antecedentes familiares, mi disonante e incomprensible personalidad no incluía ni un miligramo de ternura, lo cual, como a Torvaldo Elmer, me incapacitaba de por vida para el mayor de los milagros, es decir, para todo aquello que fuera sencillo, cotidiano, dulce y amable. En otras palabras, para lo que en su opinión debía ser la "escritura femenina". Ella, con su cara de primate, se consideraba una dama de ideas avanzadas y a sus ojos yo era un fracaso en potencia. (Portela, 1999: 95–96)

In the previous quotation Luzángela appears as a parodic inversion of Luce Irigaray and her feminist theories. Luzángela associates "feminine writing" with "todo aquello que fuera sencillo, cotidiano, dulce y amable". There is also a phonetic game between the name of the French feminist and that of Djuna's friend. Portela also plays on the pun of "el sano juicio de especular" of Luzángela to establish a connection with the theory of Luce Irigaray on the speculum. As Alison Martin observes, in relation to Irigaray's position concerning women, which is relevant here:

The only historically valorized part of her sex that cannot be represented in a flat mirror are women's

sexual organs, and on one level Irigaray means quite literally that these cannot be seen in this mirror. Hence the revelation by psychoanalysis that woman is seen as castrated or as a defective male, and the representation of woman in philosophy as unformed, as nothingness or lack. For Irigaray, only a different kind of mirror, such as the speculum, could represent woman and thwart the assumption of linear symmetry in the mirror metaphor. Furthermore, such a mirror would make apparent the effects of the instruments or modalities of representation in a way that the flat mirror tends to obfuscate with its deceptively accurate symmetrical image of an appearance as a copy of reality. (Martin, 2000: 145)

Djuna by dressing in drag attempts to represent her true self, which to a certain extent would still make her “the defective male” that Irigaray criticizes. Djuna parodies Luce Irigaray’s “sano ejercicio de especular” as one with which she cannot identify. Indeed, according to Luzángela, Djuna has nothing to do with feminine writing. Instead, Djuna is associated and compared with Torvaldo Elmer, Nora’s husband in *A Doll’s House* (Ibsen, 1879), and Luzángela will go even further by comparing Djuna not with the feminine protagonist of *A Doll’s House* but with the oppressive husband, representative of the patriarchal order. However, I posit that Portela’s text itself challenges Luzángela’s suggestions, since the feminine writing will be exposed through what Portela claims to be the mix-and-match condition of “la sustancia pulp”.

“Una extraña entre las piedras” challenges, above all, the concept of an absolute truth and the existence of real critics of literature. When faced with Dalilah M.’s criticism of both the North American writer Djuna and her novel *Nightwood* (in a clear game of mirrors where Dalilah M. is actually criticizing our protagonist—also named Djuna—and her writing), Djuna will question the existence of “los críticos serios”, “los críticos de verdad”, by affirming that “(el hecho de ser ‘de verdad’ se iba convirtiendo cada día en un privilegio más discutible y, por tanto, menos exclusivo)” (Portela, 1999: 97). Through her writing of this story, Portela asserts that writers and readers must not attempt to fix the fluidity of a text, and they can never consider themselves empowered enough to own “la Razón” (Portela, 1999: 98). After Dalilah’s criticism, Djuna states: “Era como si no compartiéramos el mismo código, el mismo ‘sabor’ de la hispanidad, del orgullo latino tan proclamado de costa a costa por Univisión y que tal vez nos atribuían los *wasp* de la mesa de al lado” (Portela, 1999: 98) and thus, once again, highlights that the uniformity and homogeneity of the Hispanic community is a construct, a fake feature attributed from outside (the Spanish-language television network in the US, “Univisión”, and the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, “los *wasp*”). When Djuna labels as

*wasp* the persons sitting next to her, she also asserts her marginality by focusing on the alterity of the Other.

Djuna starts looking at some papers and photographs, which the reader can see only through her gaze (again the gaze), and thus, the reader has a feeling of the importance that the images have in this short story as plurivalent signs. Djuna claims, referring to her image in the picture: “aquí parezco una réplica algo distorsionada de Wyatt Earp y a un tiempo la dichosa reina del puente de Brooklyn. En aquella época estaban de moda las imágenes ambiguas y el juego con la inversión de roles como otras derivaciones de la sustancia *pulp*” (Portela, 1999: 104). Ambiguity and the inversion of roles are part of the “sustancia *pulp*” and of the protagonist herself. Djuna will try throughout her narration to define the “sustancia *pulp*” but she will realize that she can define some of its features but that she is unable to define it in fixed terms. Because of this, I posit that “la sustancia *pulp*” has more to do with postmodernism and feminine writing than expected; although in this text the narrator seems to deny the importance of feminists such as Luce Irigaray, as mentioned above, she shares with her an interest in exploring an antipatriarchal discourse. The nature of the protagonist is too fluid to be able to write something based only on a socio political reality. The narrator cannot be more explicit when she looks at herself, symbolically blurry, vague: “Otra foto que me gusta es esta, donde quedé algo borrosa, como desvaída—nada podía ser más simbólico: yo estaba por el suelo—, y abrazada a Sombra, quien no luce nada mal cuando sonrío” (Portela, 1999: 106). The narrator continues looking at her pictures and describing them. The photos are symbols of the memory and the identity of the protagonist. It is by means of the photos that the protagonist recreates herself; she re-writes herself thus:

Ahora reviso esas fotos y otras frente al altar de Saint Patrick, con la hermana de Natalia y los otros turistas también provistos de amenazadoras cámaras; con los rascacielos al fondo en las alturas de Promenade, donde escribí mis primeras (y casi únicas) malas palabras en inglés, [...] en una servilleta que le dejé de recuerdo al capitán del restaurante griego más abominable del mundo; en una librería peculiar de SoHo donde alegremente coincidí con Woody Allen, convaleciente de un divorcio y disfrazado de espermatozoide judío que sólo espera cambiar de religión; a la entrada del Guggenheim; llena de siglo XXVIII [*sic*] en la Van Cortland, la casa más antigua del Bronx; perdida entre los monstruosos y no muy organizados anaqueles de Strand, donde buscaba, creo, un libro de Margaret Rose o Linda Hutcheon necesario para el Ph.D. sobre parodia postmoderna [...]; en Wave Hill, el más hermoso lugar de toda New York según el alcalde David Dinkins; [...] por ahí, en los otros

diversos y casi olvidados rincones de la gran ciudad que nunca ha sido del todo mía.

Durante los últimos años no he salido mucho o, al menos, no he pretendido cargar con tantos ambientes. Como si hubiera advertido al fin la imposibilidad de volver a los tiempos anteriores a la sustancia *pulp*, cuando aún no se había perdido del todo la inocencia y uno esperaba llegar a ser de alguna manera auténtico u original. Hasta hace muy poco Nepomorrosa me decía que nadie como yo, el pájaro traumatizado de los aeropuertos, para guardar fotos del lugar donde habito. Ella, a diferencia de Sombra, intuía que no se trataba sólo de narcisismo, aunque, de ser así, tampoco le hubiera molestado. Con esas imágenes, donde se superponen lo verdadero, lo falso y algún anhelo borroso, yo procuraba de alguna manera integrarme al paisaje, al mundo que me rodeaba sin penetrarme y que, según la mayoría, no me había recibido mal. Nepomorrosa lo sabía bien. Ella, que no aparece en ninguna foto porque se sentía transparente, mujer del agua, y la asustaban las cámaras. Yo quería adueñarme de la ciudad, llevarla conmigo. Porque yo llegué a la ciudad sin nada. Quería echar raíces que no parecieran pequeños diablitos. Construirme un pasado como se los construía a los transeúntes, inventarme unos ancestros menos apócrifos que los perdidos en la noche triste de América.

Mínimas reliquias, también conservo algunos viejos manuscritos anteriores a Mac (cuentos, aforismos, apuntes de viajes por hacer, proyectos), tarjetas de Navidad, teléfonos, números de fax y de *mail*, direcciones anotadas en cualquier trozo [...], recetas de cocina y de magia blanca, [...] cartas, comprobantes, aquel pasaje imprescindible y sin descuento que no llegué a usar en la vertiginosa tarde de la Disyuntiva. Tales son los materiales muertos con que voy reconstruyendo la historia. Porque, aunque incierta y dilatada, en el fondo hay una historia. Ella se deja leer entre líneas, dibuja ondas en los espacios vacíos. Y no puede ser de otra manera, con tanto desgarramiento ... (Portela, 1999: 112–14)

In the previous quotation we see the protagonist travelling around the United States in a fixed time given by the reference to David Dinkins, who was Mayor of New York from 1990 to 1993, and she alludes to places, persons and books that are icons of American culture. It is through her writing and the pictures that the protagonist tries to recreate her past, and through cultural memory turns into a character of this writing, where the limits between reality and fiction intermingle again. By inserting herself within the context of the photographs, the protagonist, in an attempt to be "authentic" and "original", will forge her own identity within the parameters of the nation. This goal will appear, however, as an impossible dream. According to the narrator, after a historical period that has seen the consolidation of the "sustancia *pulp*" where reality and simulacrum

are superimposed and the oppositions between copy and original, or photograph and reality, are dysfunctional, the national boundaries will be dysfunctional too. Hence, it is not arbitrary that the narrator refers to Linda Hutcheon's study on postmodern parodies, since "Una extraña entre las piedras" can be considered an example of such postmodern writing. As Graham Allen rightly observes:

Postmodernism is a particularly debated term. However, there are recurrent themes in these debates. Firstly, the idea that national limits for social and cultural identity have been superseded by a global environment in which multinational companies are now more important than national governments in directing social and cultural tendencies. Secondly, such a transnational system is characterized by "empty signifiers", or representations and signs which have no base in a recognizable, lived reality. Many descriptions of Postmodernism depict a transnational cultural situation in which pastiche and parody of earlier forms and styles predominate. Postmodern art, many argue, rejects notions of originality and Modernism's desire to "Make it New", and cultivates a wilfully derivative, mixed and thoroughly intertextual approach which attempts to capture a new age in which old certainties about historical knowledge, social progress and even the ability to represent the external world have collapsed. (Allen, 2000: 217)

The similarities between this idea of postmodernism and this "incierto y dilatada" metanarrative are obvious in this text. "Una extraña entre las piedras" blurs national and cultural boundaries by presenting a transnational individual in a text that does not need to allude to a "recognizable, lived reality" and is justified by itself. Through the use of intertextuality, parodies, humour and dialogism this short story rejects the notion of originality, the God-like author and blurs the limits between fiction and reality.

Djuna reflects on her role as writer and as woman, with reference to the literary canon and literature in general, and with emphasis on what she elusively labels as "sustancia *pulp*":

Tal vez me hubiera gustado ser una escritora feliz, pero el hecho es que no lo era. Y nunca lo he sido, al menos no en el sentido que ellas —y algunos ellos complacientes— le daban al término. Ser una escritora a secas ya me parecía bastante, incluso demasiado, sobre todo porque tampoco veía nada especial en ser mujer. Sigo sin verlo. Ser mujer, como ser hombre, animal, vegetal, mineral o extraterrestre, es una fatalidad y no una elección. Se es mujer pese a todo y sin esfuerzo, sin responsabilidad. No había por qué armar tanto ruido, reescribir la Historia, demostrar que fulanita había sido mejor que fulanito, profanar las tumbas de nuestras ilustres antepasadas y descubrir el Hudson. No era necesario privilegiar



los temas eróticos, los espacios interiores y familiares, la página descuidada con errores gratuitos de sintaxis y de puntuación, la ignorancia iconoclasta, la inmediatez más burda, la trivialidad, la falta de rigor en la crítica, el color local, la propaganda torpe y las pasiones baratas. El determinismo a ultranza.

Por otro lado, tampoco era necesario que me preocupara tanto. Las niñas jugaban a cambiar el mundo y a darse importancia. No era tan grave. Muchas personas necesitan refugiarse en un grupo cueste lo que cueste, porque en la soledad se parecen bastante a ese ser conocido por “absolutamente nadie”. Lo que a mí me incomodaba y me ponía los pelos de punta otorgaba un sentido a la vida de otros. [...] La sustancia *pulp*, tan semejante a los detritus y al fanguito, a las instalaciones con basura y a los personajes siniestros de los *comics*, existía por sí misma. ¿Qué más daba si alguien la ponía en tela de juicio? Ella nunca necesitó apologistas. Era tan simpática y traicionera que prefería a sus detractores. Defenderla era una tarea ardua, no solo porque implicaba ir en contra de los compromisos, de las oposiciones en apariencia más evidentes, sino también porque era difícil predicar cualquier cosa acerca de ella. La sustancia *pulp* era el dios de los noventa. Nepomorrosa se parecía a la sustancia *pulp*. (Portela, 1999: 115–16)

The narrator eliminates any possibility of relating her “desgarramiento”, her unhappiness to the fact of being a woman. In a clear allusion, again, to the determinist theories of the feminists, especially the French-language feminists, Djuna denies any of the basic principles of the above mentioned theories: the narrator separates herself from the existence of a feminine writing, in contrast to Simone de Beauvoir who wrote that a woman is not born as a woman but she becomes a woman; the protagonist affirms that to be a woman is “una fatalidad” and that “se es mujer pese a todo y sin esfuerzo, sin responsabilidad”. The narrator also denies the need to revise the literary masculine canon and to rescue those women silenced by the patriarchal order. Moreover, Djuna denies any categorization of the writing, and separates it from the subject that produces it and challenges the common places of the so-called feminine writing. Against the latter, Djuna extolls the substance *pulp* that she associates with waste, with the abject. The reference to the substance *pulp* as “el dios de los noventa” reinforces a link between *pulp* and postmodernism in a particular time period. In Portela’s story, whereas Sombra represents the monologic side of socialist realism, Nepomorrosa will personify with her body and her story the substance *pulp*, a postmodern feminine writing.

Nonetheless, despite Portela’s affirmations through her narrative, I shall emphasize here some of those characteristics that Hélène Cixous identifies with feminine writing and that I posit become

part of the “sustancia *pulp*” in this short story. In her essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” Cixous claims:

I shall speak about women’s writing: *about what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reason, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text —as into the world and into history— by her own movement. (Cixous, 1980: 245)

In her writing, Djuna writes herself through the gaze —her reflections of herself in the pictures and her body as seen by her lovers. She creates a feminine world and she and her writing are inseparable. Djuna “puts herself into the text”, at the same time as she tries to negotiate her own historical space in the world (her individual story versus History). Cixous continues talking about feminine writing thus:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded —which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. (Cixous, 1980: 253)

Cixous highlights the fluid essence of women and highlights the feminine capacity to know the other. In Portela’s story, both Nepomorrosa and the protagonist identify with water and fog, symbols of the impossibility of being defined in fixed terms, akin to Cixous’s theory. This story is also a constant search for the other, and, therefore, a valid example of feminine writing, as breaker of automatisms. The substance *pulp* shares this inability and resistance to be defined; as mentioned above: “era difícil predicar cualquier cosa acerca de ella”. Portela, against what Djuna states, uses her writing to resist and subvert the phallogocentric heterosexual system to which Cixous refers, as cited above. Therefore, we can conclude that “la sustancia *pulp*” shares its main characteristics with the elusiveness found in postmodernism and in feminine writing.

Writing in the hands of Portela’s narrator becomes a site of resistance and a tool apt to face solitude and death, and writing will represent an escape from madness:

Y ha llegado la zona más blanca de la historia, el momento de decir lo que no quiero, lo que hasta ahora he estado parafraseando como alguien que pretende



olvidar con tal de no revivir su propia muerte, de lo que se vuelve terrible y desconcertante ahora que la bella Nepomorrosa no está. Porque hace tres semanas que ella no está —a veces ocurren accidentes— y yo seco el piso y me escondo de mi editor y de los periodistas y escribo de Sombra y del Clan Campbell y de Nueva York para hacerme a la idea de que no vuelvo a estar sola, de que envejecer sin miedo me ha valido de algo, de que la tregua pactada con la ciudad por un lapso de cuarenta años no era un acuerdo ficticio. Ya no escribo para divertirme y de paso acceder al *hall* de la fama. Escribo para no volverme loca. También Marguerite Yourcenar y la otra Djuna perdieron a sus amantes, a las mujeres que (¿ingenuamente?) habían elegido para toda la vida. Pero no puedo compararme con ellas, nunca le hice caso a Sombra, nunca crecí. Demasiado desasida, demasiado romántica y egoísta era yo, pienso, para dejar de ser la más pequeña, la consentida. La que todo lo tiene y no consigue ser feliz ni por casualidad. ¿Por qué tenía que ser ella primero?, no dejo de preguntarme. (Portela, 1999: 118)

And the author-narrator, from her perspective as a mature woman, tells us “mal y rápido” that her first novel was a success: “Un gran *coffee* con todos los ingredientes que exigía el fin del milenio” (Portela, 1999: 118). Even an “infamous” film was made based on it, which won a nomination to the Academy Awards. It is at this moment when the protagonist has to face the dilemma of either moving away from New York to get a new job in Los Angeles or staying. Her “Disyuntiva” gets solved when she accompanies Sombra to the university and meets Nepomorrosa; the gaze appears again: “Me miró como si quisiera arrancarme no sólo la ropa, sino también la piel, las marcas, la voz, el final de este cuento, los últimos residuos del bosque de la noche” (Portela, 1999: 120) and the narrator feels “desprovista del peso y de las culpas de una Disyuntiva que así, de repente, había dejado de existir. Me miré en sus ojos y me gustó una vez más mi propio reflejo. New York volvía a ofrecerme una oportunidad. Un segundo aire” (Portela, 1999: 120). And although Sombra warns her that Nepomorrosa “era *straight*” (Portela, 1999: 121), “Verme en los ojos de Nepomorrosa y deshacerme de un montón de preocupaciones como de otros tantos tarecos inútiles fue lo mismo” (Portela, 1999: 121). In this story we find the repetition of the stereotype of the lovers as reflection of one another. In this case lesbian love is portrayed as the ideal one. The mirror, also related to the gaze, appears as a symbol of the homosexual identity. As made evident in the following paragraph the lesbian gaze, the writing, and the substance *pulp* intermingle in this story to challenge homogeneous positions:

Nita, mi consejera autotitulada, movió la cabeza aquella vez como hubiera hecho un general de la

División del Norte y me preguntó si yo estaba segura de lo que había visto. La sustancia *pulp*, en efecto, había venido a complicar los múltiples sentidos de la mirada *gay* de manera tal que a veces ni siquiera podíamos reconocernos. Se había perdido la pureza y no era raro que la gente *straight* quisiera, como quien dice, “probar”. En este caso no era conveniente fabricarse una historia de amor. Fíjate, me dijo, que te puedes meter en un gran rollo, eso de competir con un tipo no me parece nada saludable y, en el mejor de los casos, vas a tener que empezar por el principio. ¿Y por dónde si no se empiezan todas las cosas?, le pregunté. Por ahí se encuentran personas muy lindas, pero también muy difíciles de “civilizar”, ¿tú entiendes? Más o menos. ¿Pero qué coño te pasa ahora? ¿Acaso no lo tienes todo? Deberías estar en L.A. y no aquí enredándote la vida.

Por supuesto que no lo tenía todo. Nadie tiene todo, porque la totalidad es un atributo divino. (Portela, 1999: 121)

The gaze turns at the end of the story into a lesbian gaze, as proof of the sexual identity assumed by the protagonist. This lesbian gaze is portrayed as part of a postmodern gaze that dominates “la sustancia *pulp*”, thus defying all monologic, pre-established boundaries of gender identity. The text presents a fluidity that turns out to be personified in Nepomorrosa, who, after having a heterosexual relationship, becomes Djuna’s lover. Therefore, by the end of the story, Nepomorrosa herself represents *pulp*, postmodern writing, and a lesbian gaze.

In a parodic reversal of Tennessee William’s play, and the film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the protagonist asserts: “fabiqué una nueva historia de amor, y le declaré la guerra a Billy, el cavernícola. Tal fue mi modesta contribución a la Causa, mi etapa heroica” (Portela, 1999: 122). As opposed to Sombra’s “Cause”, which was left-wing and ideologically charged, Djuna’s “Cause” will be gender-focused through a lesbian gaze, as she exploits the play by means of intertextuality: “porque alguna vez en la vida Blanche tenía que derrotar a Stanley en su batalla por el alma de Stella”. The narrator expresses her lesbian love towards Nepomorrosa in relation to Nepomorrosa’s alleged heterosexuality through Tennessee William’s characters, and thus she reverses the end of the play in her story.

“Una extraña entre las piedras” closes on itself when it finishes as it began, with Nepomorrosa:

Pero no, no es así. Hay días, como hoy, en que estoy segura de que nadie posee a nadie, de que las batallas casi siempre son inútiles. Pienso que Nepomorrosa me dejó creer que yo ganaba porque ella conocía mis debilidades, no sé de dónde, pero las conocía, y todo aquel rollo (el cavernícola llegó a agredirme con una navaja y no quedó más remedio que internarlo) fue un gesto suyo de amor. Porque, gracias a Dios, fue

Nepomorróna quien me eligió a mí en una época en que yo aún no sabía elegir ni para bien ni para mal y de vez en cuando semejaba una copia fiel de “aquel particular” que se describe en ... da lo mismo. Y es que ahora comienza la verdadera historia. (Portela, 1999: 122)

This end to the story confirms a parodic reversal of the play when it is “el cavernícola”, that is to say, Stanley, the one who has to be confined to a psychiatric institution; thus we have the “madman” in a reversal of the so-called “mad woman” in gender studies. It is at this point that Djuna and Nepomorróna can begin their lesbian relationship. Overall, the story closes over itself in a constant cyclical repetition. This narrative exercise with metafiction at its core is what constitutes the “sustancia *pulp*” that the narrator leaves as amorphous and elusive throughout the story, as it participates in the fluidity of postmodern and feminist discourses, at the same time as it asserts a unique point of view within feminist studies; that is to say, it does not attempt to give a primordial state to feminine discourse. However, despite the assertions to this effect, as I have shown in this study, in the end we as readers witness a process of creation, a construct to reflect on feminine writing, lesbian gaze and transnationality through a very successful metanarrative enterprise, with intertextuality and American culture at its core. Hence, in “Una extraña entre las piedras”, Portela has been able to place Cuban narrative produced by authors on the island in a very different setting and context, thus challenging the

monologic and homogeneous positions created in terms of post-revolutionary Cuban subjectivities.

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