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Narrative Closure and “Woman”: The Case of *Vírgenes y mártires*

DIANA L. VÉLEZ

ABSTRACT

The article analyzes two texts in the collection *Vírgenes y mártires*: “Letra para salsa y tres soneos por encargo” by Ana Lydia Vega and “Milagros, Calle Mercurio” by Carmen Lugo Filippi. The texts, which are “writerly” in the Barthesian sense, are open texts. The resistance to narrative closure, it is argued here, allows the distanced reader to question gender arrangements and the ethical positions available to women in society. It is concluded that “woman’s place” is problematic and ultimately, an impossible subject position.

[Key words: literary analysis, Puerto Rico, gender, psychoanalysis, Lacan]



“As any society changes its social structure, changes its economic base, artifacts are re-created within it. Literary forms arise as one of the ways in which changing subjects create themselves as subjects within a new social context (...)”

—JULIET MITCHELL
WOMEN, THE LONGEST REVOLUTION (289)



“I do not believe there is such a thing as female writing, ‘women’s voice.’ There is the hysteric’s voice, which is the woman’s masculine language (one has to speak ‘masculinely’ in a phallogentric world) talking about feminine experience.”

—JULIET MITCHELL
WOMEN, THE LONGEST REVOLUTION (289)



“(T)he concept of identification comes little by little to have the central importance which makes it, not simply one psychical mechanism among others, but the operation itself whereby the human subject is constituted.”

—LAPLANCHE AND PONTALIS,
THE LANGUAGE OF PSYCHOANALYSIS (205)

This paper examines two stories by Puerto Rican women who call into question the gendered position of women in Puerto Rican society. I will argue that they do so in ways that are narratively and socially radical, and that the narratives' questioning in formal terms points to and throws into crisis the phallogocentric need to define subject positions as being either "male" or "female," "virgin" or "whore," "passive" or "active" and other dualisms inherent in language. The two stories, even though they were published over twenty years ago, continue to be cutting-edge narratives because what they throw into question is discourse itself.

The two stories examined here have become relatively canonical. The first, "Letra para salsa y tres soneos por encargo (Salsa Lyrics and Three Riffs by Request) (81–88), is by Ana Lydia Vega; the second, "Milagros, Calle Mercurio" (Milagros, on Mercurio Street) (25–38), is by Carmen Lugo Filippi (all translations in this paper are my own). Both stories resist narrative closure, a resistance which, as I have argued elsewhere, marks the new feminist writing and provides an avenue for an active reader to ponder crucial issues of women in society, specifically those pertaining to ethics (Vélez 1984). Simone de Beauvoir's famous dictum that there are two kinds of beings in the world—human beings and women—is relevant here, as the stories destabilize prescriptive gender assignments that make the subject position "woman" untenable. By focusing on two stories that question "woman's place" in narratively radical ways, I hope to show that, rather than providing realist closure and its attendant sense of mastery, these stories force the reader into taking an active role in the construction of meaning, guided, however, by the realities represented in the text. Using Roland Barthes's terminology, these are "writerly" texts (5). I will argue here that they allow a space beyond the ending wherein the reader can question and undermine culturally specific gender arrangements and assignments.

The two stories undermine a received sexist cultural code in complex ways. The texts' openness operates as a challenge to the reader, abandoning her or him in a space where the rapid movement of narrative pleasure that is the short story ends abruptly, leaving the reader to do the slow intellectual work of pondering important ethical issues. The narratives do not prescribe solutions to the problem "woman." Instead, they limit themselves to positioning the reader in such a way so as to provide an avenue to a consideration of these problematic issues.

In one of the epigraphs above, Juliet Mitchell reminds us that the dynamism of societies brings about new artistic forms. Post-World War II Puerto Rico provides an excellent example of human subjects reconstituting themselves. Puerto Rico after World War II underwent massive restructuring following what became known as the "Puerto Rican Model" of development: tax breaks for capital investors, the rapid building, mostly funded by the insular government, of an infrastructure for manufacturing and job training for workers. As sugar cultivation stopped being an important sector of the economy, there was a massive flow of population into the cities. The triumphalist tone of government planners' discourse hid the human reality: that "modernization" had failed to integrate workers into the new industries in meaningful numbers. This so-called modernization was nothing other than *dependent* capitalist industrialization, wherein most companies were foreign owned and production was for export. But one of the changes that industrialization *did* bring about was the increased labor-force participation of *puertorrique as*.

The development model of attracting foreign capital for industrialization of the economy created a mass of unemployed workers who were forced to migrate to the U.S. mainland in search of work. Already in the 1980s, the labor-intensive companies

associated with an earlier period of “development” had given way to the larger corporations—primarily pharmaceuticals and computer companies—which hired fewer workers than the earlier garment factories had done. Rural workers who had migrated into the cities in search of work had created a serious housing crisis, and many of these displaced people were living in shantytowns. Puerto Rican writers of earlier generations addressed these social ills in their work.

This economic picture had an impact on Puerto Rican women, for, while many of them could still find work in the few garment factories that remained, and some got jobs in the newer electronics and pharmaceutical industries, and as secretaries, cashiers, bank tellers, and government-sector workers, men all too often found themselves out of work, unable to support their families. Male unemployment, coupled with a received cultural code of *machismo*, brought about a new kind of street-corner subculture, one different in kind from the older plaza culture. Eduardo Seda-Bonilla compares the two and finds that, while the old plaza was a place for discussion of current events and other forms of community sharing, including a certain amount of harmless flirting between the sexes, by 1980 most town plazas were pretty much deserted at night because of the increased criminality, one of the ills attendant to the endemic unemployment (36–37). They had become dangerous spaces. All too often, drug addiction, alcohol abuse, and prostitution marked the new street culture in the larger cities and towns.

This changed social reality was, understandably, grist for the mills of the country’s most gifted writers. Among these is Luis Rafael Sánchez, whose story, “Etc.” represents a streetcorner male with whom the reader has an ironic relationship. That is, the reader knows and understands more than does the character, to hilarious effect. The first-person narrator is a leech who manically describes his search for a perfect set of *nalgas* to goose. In passing he describes his situation at home, and we discover that he is being cuckolded. But he himself hasn’t got a clue as he chats away to us about his obsession with and constant search for those perfect buttocks waiting to be pinched in Santurce’s busy streets. Meanwhile it becomes clear to us that it is *he*, and not the women he wants to goose, who is the recipient of sexual misbehavior. The character repeatedly uses the euphemism “William Penn” to refer to other males, but we know that it is he himself who is the *pen*....

Similarly, there is, in the first story of our analysis, a structuring of the reader in an ironic relationship to the male character. In Vega’s story there is an inversion of roles. The female acts male, and the male acts female. Our working definition of these terms is usually male=active and female=passive, a traditional definition which has a long, if not illustrious, history, and is, in some sense, the very problem addressed by the story.

“Letra...” and “Milagros...” were first published as part of a joint project by the two authors, the short story collection *V rgenes y m rtires*. In fact, the very last story in the collection was written jointly by the two women, both of whom are professors at the University of Puerto Rico. This collaboration was seen by critics at the time as being somewhat groundbreaking since creative writing is usually considered a solitary activity. First published in 1981, the book shocked the Island’s reading public. In candid, often acerbic language that was overtly sexual and satirical, the writers presented a reflecting mirror of male-female relations in Puerto Rico that threw into question the society’s gender code. Not only did the female characters violate accepted behavioral norms, they also violated the sociolinguistic speech norm “*Las mujeres decentes no hablan as*” ((Nice) girls don’t use that kind of language) (Vega Bípida...95–96). *V rgenes* became a best-seller.

The book's cover depicts a mannequin wearing a wedding veil held in place by a crown of thorns, a symbol of the Crucifixion and by extension, a portrayal of women's oppression through the sacrificial marriage contract.

When these stories first circulated in Puerto Rico, even with a third or more of the labor force displaced to the U.S. mainland, unemployment in Puerto Rico had continued unabated. The stock male character in "Letra para salsa y tres soneos por encargo" represents a whole class of mildly lumpenized males with nothing but time on their hands. The story takes up that aspect of Puerto Rican common sense that we can here call the "street-as-male-space" norm as the story opens with those all-too-familiar *piropos*, a practice widespread throughout Latin America. This behavior is socially approved of, or at least, tolerated. Boys will be boys. When seen from a critical perspective, however, this practice constitutes a form of verbal assault on women by men and makes the public space an uncomfortable one for women. The practice probably harks back to a time when women were seen to belong in the home. One example of this ideology is the well-known sexist remark about women drivers, which has the effect of prescribing home as the proper place for women. They really shouldn't be behind the wheel.

In that older, patriarchal culture, the public space of the plaza was one whose activities in terms of gender interactions were relatively well monitored and coded. There was the traditional promenade of men and women and some flirting, but the space was pretty much men's. In fact, the expression "*una mujer de la calle*" (a woman of the streets) refers to a prostitute. Today, in part due to increased criminality, women still have to be accompanied by a male to be safe in certain neighborhoods. Moreover, the street as physical space is contested ground, occupied by both males, many of whom are unemployed, displaced from their traditional role as breadwinners, and by females, many more of whom are in the labor force and thus have a "right" to be in the public space. This space also involves a class issue, for street-corner culture is often a lumpenized, slightly threatening space for middle class women, making them prey to verbal assaults, often by men of a lower social stratum.

In recent Puerto Rican literature, particularly since the 1980s, the new social reality and its impact on gender arrangements are being represented by women writers in relatively large numbers. The stories studied here are merely two examples of this representation and questioning. Other examples are to be found in the writings of Rosario Ferré, Mayra Montero, Carmen Valle, and others.

In "Letra para salsa y tres soneos por encargo," Ana Lydia Vega represents this street experience. *La Tipa* is a woman, an everywoman in some sense, a speaking subject who takes sexual matters into her own hands. If we follow Juliet Mitchell, *La Tipa* speaks masculinely in a phallogocentric world, the only voice a woman can have. Speaking in old-fashioned terms, this woman is *machuda* (dikey), because she wrests for herself both the power of speech and of sexual activity. But this is no feminist fairytale. There's no happy ending here after the violation of the Law. Instead, the author gives us three possible endings, none of which provides the desired closure. What we have instead is a troubling, if humorous, trifurcation of possibility, none of which provides a satisfying ending.

Ana Lydia Vega's story is perhaps the most caustic treatment of the street-corner male to be found in contemporary Latin American literature. But I think the story's primary importance lies in how it problematizes female subjectivity. The female protagonist in a sexist social order simply cannot occupy *any* subject position. *La Tipa* tries, but fails to occupy the subject position "liberated woman" by acting in ways that are coded as male. The strategy fails.

The male figure also fails, for in order to occupy the subject position “male,” he would have to perform sexually, and he can’t. He can only fake it, i.e., he lies about it. The resulting failure inscribes dissatisfaction for both parties.

Our entry into the story, its title, places the reader in the realm of Puerto Rican popular music, salsa. The lyrics of this type of music are often sexist, part of an overarching cultural code wherein females are the passive recipients of male conquest (see Aparicio). The story’s epigraph: *La vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te da la vida*, (life sometimes *does* hand you its little surprises), is the refrain of Ruben Blades’s popular song *Pedro Navaja*. And surprise is what Pedro Navaja must have felt when he realized the prostitute he was about to knife was carrying a revolver, the weapon she uses to kill him and take off before the cops come on the scene. This Latino Mack the Knife’s “surprise” is structured very much like the text of the story we are about to read: a male plans to take (violent) action against a female but, by means of a reversal, he becomes instead the object of her *movida*. The epigraph hints at a revenge narrative to come.

The actual story begins on a busy commercial street in Río Piedras. By the 1980s, when *Vergennes y mrtires* was circulating widely, De Diego street was a teeming urban public space no longer exclusively male, but one which had become the stomping ground of women engaged in all kinds of activity as workers, vendors, shoppers, and students. The street had become a ground of contestation in every sense. It is there that the streetcorner male, an undifferentiated *El Tipo*, aims his sexually inflected litany at *La Tipa* in time-honored fashion. The reader is meant to enjoy these witty *piropos*, allowing us to—to cite the title of one of Efraín Barradas’s books—read in *puertorriqueo*. That is, the story is heteroglossic. Our chatty narrator notes *laverdad es que la tipa est buena*. (the fact of the matter is, she is looking pretty fine)(83), while the narrator dryly observes that the male’s siege was unrelenting. It lasts *dos dias biblicos* (two biblical days)(83). Much to his surprise *La Tipa* accepts, drives them to a cheap motel, pays for the room, and undresses. But when it comes time for the sexual act he can’t perform, and they both leave the room in a state of dissatisfaction.

The two figures are types, not characters: *El Tipo*, *La Tipa*, much in the way one would narrate a story verbally. That is to say, this is a situation that is quite typical, even mundane, an example of what every woman has experienced. But what’s different here is that the usual gender attributes are reversed. It’s similar to Bakhtin’s observation about the carnival in medieval culture, wherein the world is turned upside-down (*Rabelais*, 10–11). The woman has the car and the income, and it is she who is sexually assertive. She drives a red 1969 Ford Torino, coded as male, aggressive, and sexual. It is *she* who drives them to the motel and *she* who pays for the room. He, on the other hand, lives on the dole. When she throws him a condom, the narrator: *o pudor un condescendiente cond n. Y de los indesechables.* (Oh, how embarrassing, a lowly condom, and the unflushable kind!) (86).

La Tipa is a phallic woman whose actions show up the man on the street as a victim of his own inflated rhetoric, for while he fantasizes, she acts. When the time for action comes, he cannot live up to his words. This is where the narrative pleasure lies, at least for female readers. The pleasure that women readers experience from the story, despite the narrative’s resistance to closure, comes from a sense of finally having gotten even with the annoying streetcorner male. The *macho* finally gets taken down by a woman—never mind that she, too, winds up frustrated.

In this story, the male position does not yield mastery or satisfaction, but neither do the subject positions available to the woman. If she were to follow the script,

she would accept the *piropos* humbly and perhaps avert her gaze. This would be the traditional passive approach to the verbal performance of the streetcorner male. But instead, she takes up the active—read male—role, and she just winds up scaring the poor guy who is out of his element with an active woman. The “riffs” at the end of the story—none of which is truly an ending—point to the problems involved in attempting to structure a subversive subject in narrative and, further, the impossibility of fully occupying woman’s—or man’s—place at all. This, of course, throws into question the whole system of gender and its assignments to men and to women. Both are oppressed by the gender expectations of the cultural code. The story’s aggressive openness indicates a deeper problem of subjectivity and the impossibility of identifying with either a man’s or woman’s place in an oppressive gender system.

The two authors of the collection report that many Puerto Rican women have written them seeking marital advice (Reintegro, 12). The two have had to resist becoming the Ann Landers and Abigail Van Buren of Puerto Rico. One wonders if the tremendous success of the collection is due especially to this story, and if so, if it indicates a desire for revenge on the part of Puerto Rican women, that is, revenge on the agents of their oppression as socially constructed subjects in a sexist order. Maybe they would ask an advisor “Can’t we all just get along?” but given the social constraints inherent in the system, they might wonder how.

Speaking in psychoanalytic terms, an urge for revenge responds to a desire for mastery by means of repetition. By symbolically reliving a painful episode by means of similar or contiguous circumstances, we humans give ourselves the pleasure that comes from having some measure of control over the material. By extension, reading stories such as this one does give female readers a measure of satisfaction through symbolic mastery. The frequently defensive responses of male readers to the collection show that this is a viable reading. Another indicator of this is the response of so many Puerto Rican women readers: they say that the book tells it like it is. I don’t think this common response indicates a naive realist bias. I think it points to the ease with which the stories allow these women to insert themselves, via an irreverent, caustic, and unforgiving narrator, into a text that does give them some kind of pleasure.

But what kind of pleasure is it? Textually, the conflict is somewhat slippery. It is marked by desire, but it’s not a desire for *each other*, but for something else, something outside them. It is triangulated. She doesn’t want him, she merely wants to get rid of her virginity; he doesn’t want her, he wants to impress his streetcorner friends. In the hotel room, while she’s in the bathroom undressing, he mentally returns to his corner hangout and pictures himself telling his buddies all about his exploits. That is, he appropriates her seduction, making it his, and turning it into mere entertainment for the streetcorner crowd. At the critical moment she comes out of the bathroom wearing *un guille de diosa bastante merecido* (a well-deserved air of pre-Columbian goddess)(85) and nothing else. While she is the Puerto Rican goddess Guabancex—read “authentic Puerto Rican because indigenous”—and her voice is thunder, he is merely a quivering male sitting on a *bidet* (emphasis mine) trying to put a condom on a flaccid penis. *His* figure is made ridiculous by virtue of its association with a (failed) foreign myth, Superman, the man of steel. Superman is hard while he is flaccid; he is Clark Kent desperately looking for the escape hatch: *su traje de Superm n est en el laundry* (he left his Superman suit at the cleaner’s)(86), while *she* is a gigantic Amazon thundering her demand that he undress and perform.

Who gets to speak? The narrative is constructed out of several voices. We have: a smart-aleck narrator who ridicules *El Tipo*; we have *El Tipo* talking to his street-corner friends, and we have *La Tipa's* thunder. Toward the end of the story, *La Tipa's* speech, as represented by *El Tipo* to his friends, is not “real” speech, but mythic speech. She is gigantic, heroic, larger-than-life, a pre-Columbian goddess akin to the Amazon women imagined by medieval Europeans. This befits the elaborate lie he is about to tell his *panas*. In terms of the story's farcical plot, the woman winds up with frustration and an intact hymen after a flaccid sexual encounter with a man who couldn't even perform his self-assigned function as stud.

*La Tipa sale del baño. Con un guille de diosa bastante merecido. Es muy
Tremenda india. La Chacón era chumba, brodel. (She comes out of the
bathroom completely naked, wearing the well-deserved air of a pre-
Columbian goddess. Compared to her, Iris Chacón was one flat-ass
bitch, my man.) (85)*

Whose voice is this? It is clearly *El Tipo* showing off to his buddies in his mind's eye. *El Tipo* has left the building. He has moved his imaginary operations back to the street corner, where he feels comfortable.

The female here is established variously as the male's superior. For one thing he's flustered and a little bit stupid: when they reach the motel he tries to open the car door without lifting the security button, *herculeana empresa* (Herculean task)(84) but *por fin aterriza en nombre del Homo Sapiens* (he finally lands in the name of Homo Sapiens)(84). And earlier, on the street, when *La Tipa* turns to him and says — ¿Vamos? (Want to go?), he's so surprised that he responds to her using the formal mode of address, as the narrator observes: he is *traicionado por la gramática* (betrayed by grammar)(84). She's got him beat when it comes to money, too. One of his expressions, part of the litany he uses to assault her on the street is *por tí soy capaz hasta de trabajar* (for you I'd be even willing to get me a job) (84). On the way to the motel, he thinks of the unexpected turn of events as good luck, *como cupón gratuito de la vida* (a windfall of free food stamps) (84). While she has a regular job, his wallet is *el vacío interplanetario* (a black hole).(85)

The *tres soneos* (three riffs) of the title refers to the trifurcated ending, three possible solutions to the crisis brought on by his impotence. Each of the three endings is a parody of a particular discourse. First there is the Marxist: *La Tipa rompe con un rapeo florecido de materialismo histórico y de sociedad sin clases. Fricción vigorosa de dictadura del proletariado. ... La naturaleza acude al llamado de las masas movilizadas y el acto queda dialécticamente consumado.* (She waxes eloquent with a super fine rap on historical materialism and the classless society. Vigorous rubbing of the dictatorship of the proletariat. (..)Nature heeds the call of the mobilized masses and the act is dialectically consummated.) (87). Then the feminist:

La Tipa ...machetea la opresión milenaria, la plancha perpetua y la cocina forzada, compañero. ... Emocionados, juntan cabezas y se funden en un largo beso igualitario, introduciendo exactamente la misma cantidad de lengua en las respectivas cavidades bucales. La naturaleza acude al llamado unisex y el acto queda equitativamente consumado. (She slices through millenarian oppression with her machete, that life sentence without parole on the ironing board, compañero. (...))Deeply moved, they put heads

together, melding into an egalitarian tongue kiss, with equal lengths of tongue introduced into bucal cavities. Nature heeds their unisex call and the act is egalitarianly consumed.) (88)

The final rap is cynical: *El Tipo reincide vilmente. Y se reintegra a su rastreo cachondo ... oye, baby, qu tu comes pa estar tan saludable, ave mar a, qu clase e lomillo, lo que hace el arroz con habichuelas, que troj de calne, mami, si te cojo...* (“He falls into vile recidivism. He goes back to his horny hound-dog ways (...) Hey sugar, wacchu been eatin’ make you look so well-fed? Goodgodalmighty that there’s one fine leg-o-lamb! Them rice and beans sure can do the trick. I tell you that heavenly chuck wagon’s done delivered me some juicy beef *today!* Just let me get my hands on you, girl...”) (88)

Although the three riffs at the end are given equal time, clearly the *soneto* that makes the most sense in the story is the cynical one: The more things change, the more they stay the same. Neither character obtains satisfaction, and there is no narrative resolution. As the story’s title indicates, there are three available endings, none of which resolves anything. The story remains aggressively open. Yet, speaking extra-textually, the story is so popular that one has to posit a narrative pleasure that does not depend on this.

Carmen Lugo Filippi’s text “Milagros, Calle Mercurio” also problematizes gender assignments and represents the difficulty of subverting them by means of an open ending. On both the thematic and formal levels, this story is disturbing because it opens up—but does not resolve—the issue of the subject position “woman.” As in “Letra...” “woman” here is a shifter, an identity no more stable than any other, a space or position which can only be occupied intermittently. What the story problematizes is the very process through which we become subjects, akin to Lacan’s mirror phase, wherein identification is always with a false image, one of control and plenitude. As Lacan points out, the child, when first he catches sight of himself in the mirror, obtains a (false) sense of wholeness, thinking of itself as an “I.” However, the fact of the matter is that he is being held up by the baby carrier, and if left to his own devices, could not hold himself up. (1–2) Lacan states:

We have only to understand the mirror stage *as an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytic theory, of the ancient term *imago*. (2)

Similarly, Buddhism questions the manner in which the “I” is constructed from a false image, consisting of the “wrong view” of an inherently existing self which we project onto the transitory collection, defined in the Heart Sutra as the aggregates or *skandas*: form, feeling, discrimination, compositional factors, and consciousness. In Mahayana Buddhism, the teachings on wisdom, i.e. emptiness (prajnaparamita sutras), make a clear distinction between the conventional “I” and the ultimate “I,” which does not exist (Rabten 17–24). Psychoanalysis and Buddhism agree, therefore, that the “I” is merely a series of identifications, that it is a process, and not a thing or place. Foucault, too, examined the emptiness of the “I,” or the “delusion of a separate and continuous self” in what Uta Liebmann Schaub called his “Oriental Subtext” (308).

Carmen Lugo Filippi’s story begins with a first person dramatized narrator, a divorced female head of household who, despite her three years of university

training in comparative literature has to earn her living by working as a hair stylist. She's frustrated with her life and begins to live vicariously through a young woman. She begins by telling us about her life before her move to Ponce, Puerto Rico's somewhat provincial second city. The narrator then tells us that when she lived in San Juan, she worked in a fashionable salon where her knowledge of several languages and her skill at beauty parlor one-upmanship enabled her to mildly humiliate the arrogant upper class women who came to the shop. But the key part of the narrative takes place in Ponce, where she has set up her own shop. One day she sees a tall, impassive adolescent with waist-length hair:

Fue justamente en esa poca cuando vi por vez primera a Milagros. La recuerdo tan vivamente, tal como si estuviera viendo una película española en blanco y negro, de esas bien sombrías que transcurren en un pueblecito de mala muerte, donde la esbelta protagonista de pelo largo mismo camina lentamente y de pronto la cámara se le acerca; perfecto closeup algo parsimonioso que resbala por la cara blanquísima y se regodea en las facciones inexpresivas, sobre todo en la mirada lánguida y como ausente. (It was just around that time that I saw Milagros for the first time. I recall her vividly, as if I were watching one of those Spanish black and white films, you know, those somber ones where the action takes place in a one-horse town...the willowy protagonist with long tresses slowly walks along when the camera suddenly zooms in—a perfect close-up—then slowly glides over her pale, inexpressive face, focusing especially on her languid, distant gaze.) (30)

The narrator apprehends her object cinematically, her gaze informed by years of college-student attendance at film clubs. She refers to Milagros walking to church with her mother and sister as an *escena típica buñuelesca* (a typically Buñuelesque scene), but one sentence later she undermines that distanced attitude, calling it Olympian cynicism (31). She is ambivalent about herself, for while she wishes her film-club friends could be there to witness the scene before her, she realizes that that life is gone and that she has to make sense of Milagros on her own.

The story we are reading does turn out to be Buñuelesque, particularly the Buñuel of two films, *Viridiana* and *Belle du Jour*, which undermine and question bourgeois sexual norms by presenting protagonists who engage in behaviorally inconsistent ways. Buñuel was a master filmmaker who dealt with human sexuality, desire, and the unconscious by placing the viewer in an ironic relationship to the characters portrayed. One of his favorite themes was that sex is an insistent force in human life, and that people often have a hard time keeping within society's constraints. His anti-clericalism is well known. Similarly, as do so many of Buñuel's movies, "Milagros, Calle Mercurio" depicts "fallenness" and the pitfalls of false virtue.

Marina, the first-person narrator, apprehends her object, Milagros, by referring to this cinematic tradition, but by so doing, she appropriates Milagros into a narrative of her own writing. And she thus places herself in the narrative as a Buñuelesque character, a character who doesn't know herself as well as we the readers do, a character whose motivations become questionable.

Prevented from transforming the young woman into a beauty by the girl's fundamentalist mother, Marina nonetheless writes a story for Milagros-as-beauty which prepares the girl for the approving gaze of men. This is a Pygmalion story, but with a

difference. The narrator, Marina, is so taken by the young girl, Milagros, that she spends time thinking of the beautiful ways she could style her if she were only allowed to.

At this point, the text shifts to a second-person narrator who addresses Marina:

Sí, porque constituía para ti un verdadero reto el pelo de Milagros. Incluso fantaseabas con los posibles cortes, verdaderas obras maestras dignas de figurar en Hair and Style o en Jours de France.

(Yes, Milagros' hair was a real challenge for you. You would even fantasize about possible haircuts, works of art fit for the pages of *Hair and Style* or *Jours de France*.) (31)

This voice is Marina's superego remembering, addressing herself in an accusing voice and thus distancing the reader from what up to now had been a credible realist first-person narrator. The shift from monologic to dialogic allows us to step back and question Marina's motives; she loses her privileged position as "teller of the tale" in realist prose. She becomes suspect.

Marina finally gets her chance to work on Milagros's hair when the mother brings her Milagros for some scalp treatments. Now that she's in the salon, Milagros is exposed to mass-culture magazines and develops an interest. She becomes "submerged" in them and in her own image in the mirror. After this, Marina begins to notice a change:

Anotabas también los leves cambios en el atuendo de la muchacha; un discreto escote en forma de V, una falda más ceñida que de costumbre, unas sandalias baratas pero algo pizpiretas.

(You also started to notice subtle changes in her attire; a v-necked blouse cut just a little low, a slightly tighter skirt, a pair of cheap but somewhat flashy sandals.) (32)

The narrative shifts in this story lead the reader to a place where he or she has to take an ethical position with regard to the narrator. Up to this point in the narrative, the obvious barrier to the heroine's—Milagros's—progress as defined by the first-person narrator, has been the mother's religious overprotection. But as that first-person voice—Marina's—itself becomes problematic, the issue gains in complexity. It becomes one of how we write others into our own scripts. Milagros' mother has a script for her daughter as virgin—a script which assumes physical integrity: *Se me prohibió cortar uno solo de aquellos cabellos* (I was strictly forbidden to cut off even an inch of that hair) (33). But Marina, too, has a script for Milagros. Her appropriation of Milagros is no more innocent than the mother's. The fact that she has been the narrator up to now adds an element of discomfort for the reader, who has to decide whether to accept this voice or to distance himself/herself from, even, perhaps to question it.

After her third treatment, Milagros loses her shyness. Without a touch of irony, the first-person narrator approvingly reports: *Incluso me pedía revistas y hasta fotonovelas, tipo de literatura esencial en cualquier salón de belleza.* (She even asked me for magazines and *fotonovelas*, essential literature in any beauty salon.) (33). This is when Marina begins to play a mediating role between Milagros and the male gaze, arranging the girl's hair into beautiful styles and telling her she could look like a movie star if

only she put in some effort. Milagros responds to the coaching. She comes into adulthood by means of her image in the mirror. But this reflection is a false image assisted by Marina and by the mass-culture women's magazines, which represent only women who are perfect, thin, and sexy and made up for the male gaze. The adolescent is thus subjected to masculinist culture with the help of an older woman, a figure who is traditionally maternal, nurturing, sometimes even wise.

The story's *denouement* begins with the discovery of what Milagros has been up to: doing a striptease in a roadside joint frequented by elderly men. The reader learns this via several mediations: the narrator finds out from a gossipy neighbor, Doña Fina—ironic, for “fina” means refined, who finds out from her nephew Rada, an undercover cop, who in turn learned of it from an informer. Milagros's shameful story and her name have passed through several voices before reaching the reader.

At this point, Marina, hearing the story, gives herself over to a fantasy. She spins for her own pleasure a cinematic tale in which she identifies with Rada, the cop who made the bust, thus making herself into an imaginary *voyeuse*. She writes for her own delectation a striptease filled with erotic detail, in which Milagros, onstage with her cascading, long hair, dances for the viewers: Marina/the cop/the old men/the reader. The language is erotic, filled with religious terminology: the stage is an *improvisado altar* (improvised altar); the men *ac litos sexagenarios* (sexagenarian acolytes) and *sexagenarios sacerdotes* (sexagenarian priests); the dance is *un rito* (a rite). (37)

Marina's complicity in this unexpected outcome is alluded to with a mention of *pelo lleno de pizpiretos miosotis* (hair full of flashy forget-me-nots), an adornment that was first introduced to Milagros by her trainer, Marina.

Marina watching the young girl dance in her mind's eye is identifying with a male—Rada the undercover cop—looking at Milagros. In psychoanalytic terms, the very fact that this type of identification is possible problematizes the notion of a fixed gender identity as any kind of subjectivity that can be inhabited. As Denise Riley argues, “How could someone ‘be a woman’ through and through, make a final home in that classification without suffering claustrophobia?”(6). And Julia Kristeva agrees that:

(...)there are still many goals women can achieve: freedom of abortion and contraception, day-care centers for children, equality on the job, etc. Therefore, we must use “we are women” as an advertisement or slogan for our demands. On a deeper level, however, a woman cannot ‘be’; it is something which does not even belong in the order of being. It follows that a feminist practice can only be negative, at odds with what already exists so that we may say “that’s not it” and “that’s still not it.” In “woman” I see something that cannot be represented, something that is not said, something above and beyond nomenclatures and ideologies.(137)

This superb story by Carmen Lugo Filippi points to a disturbing truth, especially for feminists: female subjects can sometimes act “masculinely” and thus hurt other women. The questions and implications for a feminist ethics are enormous. What is to be done when it is women preparing women for the male gaze? What kind of feminist ethics is possible given that truth? Our reading of the ending as being Marina masculinizing herself by gazing at Milagros in her imagination, identifying with the cop doing the raid, a figure which represents the repressive power of the state, leads us to pose questions about the ethics of writing narratives or scripts for others to perform.

When Marina creates, writes for herself, a striptease for Milagros she is objectifying her. In her imagination, she makes up a Milagros for her own (private) viewing. In this reading, her imaginary identification with the cop turns her into a “male” scriptwriter: an active, perhaps sadistic, subject with power over the object of her desire.

As in Ana Lydia Vega’s story, here, too, dance and music are important evocative and connecting elements. These first appear when Milagros’ mother does an enraptured dance to the tambourine in the fundamentalist church, asking God to send (purifying) fire, a scene witnessed by Marina as voyeuse after she follows them there without their knowledge. The second time music and dance appear is when Milagros herself dances to popular salsa music while Marina is gone from the beauty parlor:

Al regresar, me extra mucho escuchar música, pues no había dejado el radio puesto. Entré sin hacer ruido y sorprendí a Milagros de espaldas, frente al aparato colocado en un improvisado anaquel junto a la puerta del fondo. Me sorprendí gratamente oír la repetir con toda una voz de contralto el hit del momento: Tu amor es un periódico de ayer/fue titular que alcanzó página entera. Pero quedé a mí misma divertida cuando, balanceándose rítmicamente, la Milagros repetía con voz de falsete una y otra vez aquel ...y para que leer un periódico de ayer/y para que leer un periódico de ayer. No interrumpí su acto, al contrario la dejé inmersa en su contoneo. Parecí abochornada cuando me alcanzó a ver. (When I got back I was surprised to hear music since I hadn’t left the radio on. I went in quietly and there was Milagros, with her back to me in front of the radio, which she had placed on an improvised shelf near the back door. It was a pleasant surprise to hear her shyly murmuring the lyrics of the day’s hit to herself in a false contralto: “Your love’s just yesterday’s paper/even if your story took up the whole page.” But I was even more tickled to see her moving rhythmically as she repeated in a falsetto, ‘Why read a paper that’s a day old?/Why read a paper that’s a day cold?’ I didn’t interrupt her performance; on the contrary, I let her continue immersed in her gyrations. But when she caught sight of me she was embarrassed.) (34)

Again we have Marina playing the role of voyeuse as she watches Milagros without the girl’s knowledge. The third and final dance is the striptease Marina visualizes for her own pleasure as she once again occupies, in her imagination, an illicit viewer position. The first dance is religious, the second purely secular, and the third is obscene, though it is narrated in sacred language. During her mother’s dance in church, Milagros is bored. Dancing in Marina’s shop, she is impervious to the fact that the lyrics define her as a disposable commodity in sexist salsa lyrics similar to Mick Jagger’s song “Who Wants Yesterday’s Paper?” As a stripper, she actually becomes the commodity.

In this narrative, the dances available to women are three: those of (1) religious, hieratic self-abnegation, i.e., Milagros’s mother shouting: *Manda fuego, señor, manda fuego!* (Send down fire, Dear Lord, send down fire); (2) secular self-erasure, i.e., yesterday’s paper; or (3) defiled self-debasement, or woman-as-commodity performing for the gaze of lecherous old men. These dances are metonymic with the discourses available to female subjects in society. There is no escape, no individual exit from culture’s discursive inscription of women. A woman can choose to be pure

or debased, but she can't write her own story outside of culture and language.

Just as in "Letra..." the story here provides three possible endings, inscribing the character in three different moments, or dances, which are *movidas* of a sort. The possibilities—almost as if in a joke—are three in number, but all three are impossible. Just as in the first story she received Marxist language, which is not internally convincing, fails to be adequate to the situation, here religious fundamentalism fails to engage Milagros in the story's first "dance." She's bored. And, just as the discourse of egalitarian feminism fails to take care of the problem in "Letra..." the sexist lyrics of salsa fail Milagros in this story. They merely prepare her body for the third dance or *movida*, which speaks for itself: it's the language of cynicism in Vega's "Letra..." and of degradation and its resulting corporal violence in Lugo-Fillippi's "Milagros...". The available options here are all not quite, not quite, not quite. The story trails off.

The cops bust the bar, and, when she finds out, Milagros's mother beats up her daughter. The day after the bust, the young woman shows up in Marina's shop wearing tight pants and carrying a suitcase. Brandishing a twenty-dollar bill, she asks Marina to make her up in shocking red and cut her hair any way she wants. Marina's wish to transform Milagros has come true, but for Milagros the transformation is merely a practical matter. She plans to earn a living by using her body in the manner presumed by the way in which it has been prepared.

At the end of the story Milagros has freed herself from the restrictions imposed by her mother's restrictive fundamentalist code, but that doesn't mean her sexuality is therefore "liberated." Instead she enters a peculiarly Latin form of sexual repression, best described by a Latina, Aurora Levins Morales:

(W)hile the chilliest Anglo-Saxon repression of sex pretends it simply doesn't exist, Latin repression says 'it's a filthy fact of life, use it for what it's worth...shake it in his face, wear it as a decoy. It's all over the floor and it's cold and savage. It's the hatred of the powerless, turned crooked. (56)

It's a form of repression that says "Look, but don't touch," or "If you want to touch, be ready to pay the price."

The story ends in a question posed to Marina and to the reader in the accusing second-person voice. Again, Milagros is inscribed in a cinematic discourse, although this time the reference is to Fellini's larger-than-life characters. Now it's Marina herself in the mirror, reflected for her own contemplation and for ours:

Un temblequeo, apenas perceptible, comienza a apoderarse de tus rodillas, pero aun así no logras apartar los ojos del espejo donde la Milagros se agranda, asume dimensiones colosales, viene hacia ti, sí, viene hacia ti en busca de una respuesta, de esa respuesta que ella urge y que tendrías que dar; no puedes aplazarla, Marina, maldita y mala, Marina, ¿quién responderá?
(You feel an almost imperceptible trembling in your legs, but even so you can't take your eyes from the mirror as you watch Milagros become larger and larger. She's growing before your very eyes, assuming colossal proportions in the mirror. She begins to walk towards you, yes, towards you in search of an answer, in search of the answer she needs and that you will have to give her. You can't put her off now, Marina, look at her, look at yourself, what will you say?) (38)

The impossibility of the choices before Marina/Milagros are those of a culturally assigned “woman’s place.” What subject position is there for the woman? What position is there that does not subject her to the binary logic virgin/whore? The ironic discourse of Marina’s imaginary striptease points to a similarity between religious and secular discourses in their phallogentrism. It’s language that has here produced the cultural effect “woman.” Religious rapture and the striptease both provide subservient subject positions for women. The “yesterday’s paper” mode provided by salsa is no alternative, and neither is the place offered to women by beauty magazines. Hence the question at the end of the text, addressed to Marina and to the reader, is *qu responder s?* (What will you say? Literally, “What will be your answer?”) (38).

When Milagros returns to the salon at the end of the story, she is ready to “go out into the world,” but what identity shall she have; who shall she be? This is a problem without a solution, for as both Denise Riley and Julia Kristeva have reminded us, there is no way to “be” a woman, once and for all. There is no place for Milagros and the story ends in a question.

Milagros, Calle Mercurio leaves the reader in the grip of a contradiction, thus hinting at broader issues: the place of voyeurism and scopophilia’s role in female sexuality, the imaginary appropriation of the other, and the subjugating (male) gaze. The story problematizes the very act of narrating the other as being itself a form of domination, a form of sadism.

This narrative takes up the psychoanalytic problem of subjectivity structured by means of a process of identification with images. The implications of this are enormous, and the story challenges the reader to write beyond the ending. “Milagros, Calle Mercurio,” represents the loss of innocence, but it also touches on the larger problem of female identity with and female complicity in the patriarchy. It questions the subject positions available for women to take up, and it points to the difficulty of apprehending the other without somehow subjecting that other to our own desire, our own script by means of our gaze. The image of the other is no longer innocent, but is instead shot through with our own subjectivity, our own desire. The seemingly innocent “pleasure” of writing a script has inscribed within it the subjugation of that other.

There is a radical instability in both stories that does not preclude the temporary construction of a subjectivity, although that process is full of pitfalls. Female characters here do not inhabit their gender in any kind of stable manner. They change their subjective identities, but this mobility provides no real exit from the prisonhouse of gender. Both stories, by denying the reader closure, structurally allow her or him to question the sexist order which is constructed in the narration itself, the subject positions available in language, and the impossibility of ever truly “being” a woman.



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