Reading The Forbidden Stories as Feminist Writing

Jacqueline Herranz Brooks

In 1998, when I was still living in Cuba, I came across a book published that year in Havana, written in the United States by a Cuban émigré, Sonia Rivera-Valdés, which had won the Casa de las Américas award in the island the year before. The book - a collection of 9 short stories and an Explanatory note entitled, Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda (The Forbidden Stories of Marta Veneranda), where diverse fictional characters confess to the main protagonist and fictional author of the “forbidden stories” their most intimate experiences, especially those that are considered by themselves as shameful ones - was “categorized” in different ways. Readers, of course, had their own experience and views about these stories, yet all of them agreed on one point: when they started reading, they couldn’t stop until it was finished. While some readers insisted on calling Sonia Rivera-Valdés’ book as “very real,” others classified this book as soft-porno literature, and considered her style as “light” writing. While some critics, such as Zaida Corniell, compared the author’s style with that of Anais Nin, other writers, such as William Monaham, wrote in a blurb for the book that the pieces were “vastly entertaining, slyly heretical, and probably the most important book of stories since Joyce’s Dubliners. ” For me, Las historias prohibidas /The Forbidden Stories (the book and its award) ruptured the constantly reproduced model in Cuba (and almost everywhere else) where the presence of literature written by men was (and still is) overwhelming. At that time, I did not appreciate the implications of this breach opened by this literary work. Back then, I wondered how a book written in such a colloquial, yet literary language, a book that uses the first person, and does not talk about what Carpentier considered the “big themes,” could be classified and/or be considered “good literature.”[1] It is just today that I can come out with my own criteria about this book, a very slippery and unclassifiable one, which I now consider to be feminist writing. But what is feminist about a feminist book anyway? How is a feminist text to be distinguished from the patriarchal and phallocentric ones? And, what is distinctive about it so we can say that it is subversive?

Any text can be read from a feminist point of view, that is, from the point of view that brings out a text’s alignment with, participation in, and subversion of patriarchal norms. But, I do not want to talk about the reader but about the text itself, so, again, what is distinctive in a feminist text? Many theorists talk about a text that is fluid, ambiguous, and experimental, but even though Rivera-Valdés’ narrative prose is very fluid, those are not the characteristics that make her “forbidden stories” a feminist work. Is Rivera-Valdés’ gender what makes her work a feminist text? Is it because of the large number of female characters that appear in her stories? In my opinion, it is not the sex of the author, the content of the work , or the characters living in this work’s fictional world, although Meyers Spacks suggests so (7 - 35). It is neither the author’s “life” outside of her literary creation or the author’s psyche, as Barthes assures (145). It is not only the style of the work, but a shift in the stories presented in the work itself. A feminist work is a subversive and destabilizing one. It is a work that presents, for example, female characters —who are hybrids, mestizas, nomads— in charge of their own “destiny” and able to challenge the restrictive phallocentric/patriarchal norms.[2] But how does Rivera-Valdés manage to do so in Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories?

First of all, a feminist text possesses a certain uneasiness about where it is going to be classified and/or located. This uneasiness and/or mobility is what, according to Gloria Anzaldua, makes those texts nomads and mestizos. In the case of Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories, the hybridity and/or mobility is first presented in the form of an introductory note signed by the fictional author, Marta Veneranda, who has gathered all the stories for this compilation. According to Marta Veneranda, the introductory note’s purpose is to explain to us, the readers, how the primary interest she first had in these stories changed. Marta Veneranda, a former student of psychology who decides to work on a project for her doctoral studies guided by one of her psychology professors, Arnold Haley, moves from a psychology project rooted in social issues to the realm of literature. She explains that she tried to gather information based on the questionnaires prepared by her professor, but they did not cover all the information the interviewed people were giving her. Since Dr. Haley, who represents phallogocentric thought, recommended Marta Veneranda to focus more on "concrete details" because her "attention to other details [...] would not allow [her] to draw any scientifically valid conclusions," she decided not to change her "research method but [her] discipline" (8).

---

[1] Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier said, in many of his interviews, that he wasn’t interested in “small” themes but only in the “big” ones. The “small” themes were, according to him, those related to daily life, those reserved for soft female writers. The “big themes” were part of what he called a “virile” literature that recreates a historical past, talks about the big Revolutions (especially the French Revolution, even though he wanted to be considered a Cuban writer), from a male perspective (he portrayed male heroes that understood, better than women, what was going on in society). “Good literature,” according to many Cuban literary critics, is the one which is written in third person and uses a “literary language,” which helps to see how the writer is able to speak metaphorically rather than directly, how the writer is capable of creating fictional worlds while the reader cannot associate the written drama with the author’s biography.

[2] Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda/The Forbidden Stones ofMarta Veneranda was produced in the United States but won a Cuban award. This book has been published in Cuba, in Spain, and in the United States, in both English and Spanish. I believe that the publication of this book in the mentioned countries illustrates one of the most significant aspects of the literature written in Spanish in the United States: it becomes a bridge between both sides of the Atlantic. Moreover, it becomes an axis, a “unifying” space for integrating the Anglo and the Hispanic cultural dialogues within the very same American continent. I think this aspect made this book hybrid/mestizo and mobile/nomad.

The stories in Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories told to Marta Veneranda by the diverse narrators are a kind of fictional truth that works as both stories and therapeutic confessions (Bejel 221). These stories presented by Marta Veneranda, who has escaped from Dr. Haley's phallogocentrism, have moved from one discipline to another (from psychology to literature), earning that uneasiness Anzaldúa talked about when considering the main characteristic of a mestiza literature. Like Anzaldúa, Rivera-Valdés' main character, Marta Veneranda, "has discovered that she can't hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries" (79). [3]

But the mobility of Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories is not only in the domain of disciplines. According to Emilio Bejel, "the struggle for classification (and also for the process of (ssimilation/rejection) is at times obvious and at others quite veiled in Rivera-Valdés' work" (210-20). Her texts have been considered, at times, as Cuban literature because they are written in Spanish. They have been classified as "ethnic literature" because the characters are non-whites, but the texts that contain them have been produced in The United States and as Cuban-American literature of the exile because it deals with immigration. But Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories is neither literature of exile nor immigration. Unlike the Cuban literature of the exile, which is marked by a feeling of loss and separation, and unlike the Cuban literature of the immigration, which carry the past as a heavy burden, Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden

Stories is more like nomadic literature because this literature is "a form of resisting assimilation or homologation into dominant ways of representing the self (Braidotti 25). Rivera-Valdés is against, in particular, the most traditional and yet dominant forms of representing the female subjectivity within the patriarchal culture and she articulates this battle throughout her characters.

The characters that repeatedly appear in Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories are the narrators of their own experiences. In the vast majority, they are working class women, some of them are lesbians, all of them Latinas and middle-aged. These characters' marginality gives them a double and triple vision, transforming them into exceptionally active human beings. It is precisely these character-narrators' agency and capacity to transform their own lives that defines the exceptionality of Rivera-Valdés' female characters in Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories. Her protagonists are active in multiple ways. First, none of them are only housekeepers hence they are economically independent from men. This independence allows Mayté Perdomo, the character in "Cinco ventanas del mismo lado" ("Five Windows on the Same Side"), to stay in New York by herself instead of following her husband to Chicago. For the narrator in "Los ojos lindos de Adela" ("Adela's Lovely Eyes"), her willingness to look for jobs and being independent allows her not only to earn her own money, but also to take positions to help her girlfriend, Adela, and, later, to go to college.

The narrators of Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories are also active in their resistance to physical or verbal abuse at home. The main character in "Entre amigas" ("Between Friends") appears to match the abused women profile; she seems incapable of breaking a circular pattern of domestic violence when she tells us:

> Lo peor siempre pasaba los viernes y los sábados, entre las diez y las tres de la mañana. A punta de insultos me llevó a emergencias de un hospital chiquito que ya estaba cerrado cuando llegamos. No ténian equipo ni para sacarme una placa. Él mismo agarró el teléfono y llamó a la policía. Al llegar me preguntaron si quería enviarlo a la carcél. Les dije que no, pensando que cuando saliera me mataría. (40-1) [4]

But this very same character, even though her abusive husband makes her "suffer, cry, and shiver," manages to get "unos trabajitos limpiando [...]

---

[3] There is, of course, another layer here. Rivera-Valdés is, in a way, "denying" authorship. It seems that this game of the "explanatory note" has gone too far since these stories are not hers but Veneranda's. The metafictional game in this book has even confused the editors from a publishing house in Spain. In the blurb for the book they wrote that the author of these stories (Rivera-Valdés) decided to leave her studies in psychology and start a career in literature. I will talk later about this but, again, these texts are very mobile/ unfixed. One of the features of this move from the personal to the collective may be the loss in importance of a "central" character.

[4] "Friday and Saturday nights were always the worst, between ten at night and three in the morning. Still hurling insults, he took me to the emergency room of a little hospital that was closing when we showed up. They didn't even have equipment to take an X ray. He picked up the phone himself, there in the hospital, and called the police. When they came, they asked me did I want to send him to jail. I told them no, because I thought he'd kill me when he got out." (40)

casas [… y] cuid[ando] ancianos enfermos" (45).[5] She tells Marta Veneranda that her husband also managed the money she earned. But this abused woman, by the end of the story, accelerates her husband's death by closing the oxygen valve that kept him alive in the hospital. The narrator of "Los venenitos" ("Little Poisons") has broken with her emotional dependency before she undertakes a more drastic action. She says that she left her husband, "por hijo de puta, muy consciente de lo que hacía, el jamás me hubiera dejado a mí" (85).[6] And later, like the abused women in "Entre amigas" ("Between Friends"), the protagonist of "Los venenitos" ("Little Poisons") kills her spouse. And finally, she considers the possibility of assassinating Fermina, her husband's lover, because she considers her unable to break with the abusive patterns of her former relationships:

> Sé que ella [Fermina], tal como la he visto conducirse ya en dos ocasiones, si él desaparece buscará otro que abuse de ella. Y dígame usted, ¿vale la pena vivir así, en el mejor de los casos, un montón de años, en el peor, toda la vida? Si se casa y empieza a parir, con lo dócil que es, olvídese, y otra posibilidad es que uno de esos tipos la mate a golpes. O a tiros, o a puñaladas. (93) [7]

The sometimes humorous tone in Rivera-Valdés' narrative does not diminish the stories' strength. Behind the layer of black humor, a traditionally ignored and censored social situation like the pact of silence established among abusers, victims, the police, and the judges is denounced. In "Between Friends" and "Little Poisons," the female characters take control over their lives and help others to do so. At this time, and in these two stories, the end justifies the means.

In "El quinto río" ("The Fifth River"), Catalina also has control over her life and explains how she thinks that "todos los cambios [que ella ha llevado a cabo] han [sido con] el propósito de vivir acorde con la ética que predico" (151).[8] Although her mother says Catalina "[nació] para nadar rio arriba [ella] no lo [cree] así" (151).[9] Catalina, who has moved from her mother's legacy to create her own set of values, asks one of the most important questions in the book: why be unhappy when you can make efforts to achieve whatever you want? (133-4). It is through Catalina's reflections that Rivera-Valdés articulates one of the most important statements in the book, the leitmotif of the stories, and the most important characteristic in these active protagonists: their capacity to transform their own existences:

> Contrario a ese desear inactivo, desde chiquita he creído en la felicidad como posibilidad real. Felicidad entendida a mi manera, queire decir, ser dueña de mi vida, hasta el punto que ella lo permite. No soy dueña de no morirme, pero cada vez que he tenido conciencia de mi desdicha, he dado los pasos para cambiar la situación, aunque haya tenido que torcer el rumbo sin previo aviso y voltear en U donde estaba prohibido hacerlo. (151)[10]

According to Rivera-Valdés herself, the themes in her literature and her narrative style are closer to feminist/queer/chicana authors Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherrié Moraga than to Cuban literature; but her characters, like her, are not Chicanos but mostly Cubans living in New York. On the one hand, although Rivera-Valdés is not a Chicana writer she writes like one. Her texts are as subversive as a feminist Chicana text because of their directness, and directness is what Cuban literature lacks (or has been lacking until the very late 90s).[11] Even though Bejel maintains that Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories thematically connects with the esthetic of the Cuban writers from the 90s, I believe that the ideology behind these texts is more about how to overcome those stereotypes that describe Latina women as silenced victims, about how not to portray those stereotypes, but to eliminate them. Their openness and sincerity is obvious because "they deal with all kinds of 'forbidden stories'; [that are] forbidden [...] from the point of view of the official history of the [Cuban]

---

[5] "a few jobs cleaning houses […] and taking care of old people" (40).

[6] "It was I who left the son of a bitch. He never would have left me. Of the two I was the more mature, understanding, serene, the sucker and the asshole" (83).

[7] Getting rid of this guy is not going to solve the problem [...] it would mean one less son of a bitch on the planet, but the world is full of them. The real problem is that women put up with them. It's Fermina who is breaking my heart. I know her. If this guy disappears, she will go out and find another one to abuse her. Do you think it's worth living like this, at best for a bunch of years, at worst all your life? If she marries and starts having kids, given how docile she is, forget it. It's all over. Or possibly, one of these guys will beat her to death. Or shoot her. Or stab her. (92)

[8] "Every change [she has] gone through has been in order to live according to the ethics [she] believe(s) in" (133).

[9] She has "always tried to swim against the current, [she doesn't] see it the same way" (133).

[10] As opposed to this inactive desire, I have always believed in the real possibility of happiness. Happiness as I see it means taking control of your own life, as far as that is possible. We can't control life and death, but each time I've become aware of the roots of my own unhappiness, I have taken steps to change the situation, even if that has meant making a sharp turn, or even an illegal U-turn. (134)

[11] For a more ample idea about how a feminist Chicana text works, see Cherrié" Moraga's Giving Up the Ghost. Also check Mylene Fernandez Pintado's Otras plegarias atendidas as an example of how a feminist character moves according to Cuban feminist standards.

nation, of traditional morals, and of the 'stereotypes of citizens' conduct'" (221).

"Cinco ventanas" ("Five Windows") illustrates from two different perspectives a situation experienced in diverse ways by two women. In this story, Mayté Perdomo - who was born in Cuba but lives in the United States and represents the nomadic subject, a woman with a mestiza/nomadic consciousness - has an affair with her cousin Laura, who lives in Cuba, but is visiting the United States.[12] After the unexpected sexual encounter between the two of them takes place, Mayté wants to discuss it with Laura. Mayté admits that she "was aghast at [her] own behavior, but Laura seemed at ease" (20). While Mayté is wondering about her sexual identity, how this identity has been formed, how it is not fixed but mobile, how to confront her infidelity and how to discuss it with her husband, Laura "admitted that this wasn't the first time this had happened" to her and that she is not going to say a word to her partner. Laura, who considers herself a mature woman and is wondering why her intelligent and educated cousin is interested in telling her husband anything at all, knows that her partner has other relationships with women and, like him, she is "not going to pass up a good time when it appears" (21). Even though she is not interested in having affairs with men but with women, she is not concerned about her homosexuality because she thinks she is not a lesbian. She is a married woman who has affairs with other women since they are not problematic at all, "there's no risk of getting pregnant" (21).

According to Laura, sexual encounters between women are nothing but unimportant adventures, very unworthy to tell. The moral codes of these two women (Laura and Mayté) are very different; what is honesty for Mayté is immaturity for Laura. They are "speaking different languages" (21). Unlike Laura, Mayté, who has acquired other values without being assimilated and considers herself more Latina than Cuban, is trying to center what has been marginalized or excluded from phallogocentric discourses: her lesbian desire. She is not judging her cousin, but thinking they are different and, unlike Laura, Mayté wants and needs to articulate her experience. She thinks that to talk about it and to confront it will help her to understand herself better. But she is not trying to fold her cousin's values or to measure them with her own standards. Rivera-Valdés, by presenting these two different approaches to the same issue, is taking a feminist position because "feminism no longer represents itself as the privileged discourse of and for all women. Instead, feminism openly acknowledges and affirms its particularities, its representation of the values and commitments of some but not all women" (de Lauretis 87). As de Lauretis discusses, feminism is a practice of the production of alternative or different knowledges, whose goal may be either the production of "new" or/and "multiple perspectives" - lesbians, women of color, working class women, neocolonial subjects - through the fragmentation and questioning of its basic goals raised by the emergence and insistence of its "others" (87).

Laura, in "Cinco ventanas," has been portrayed as a "typical" Cuban character. Because she considers herself a liberated, strong, and independent woman she will have extramarital relations, but will not discuss them, question what is wrong with her relationship, or inquire about her sexual identity. Her capacity for lying, taking lovers to "complete" her existence, and having a double life, is the path to live a feminist life, a life equal to men's lives. Hence feminism, in Cuban terms and unlike what Rivera-Valdés proposes in her stories, is sometimes the capacity of women to behave as men while reproducing the double standard feminism is supposed to be fighting, and overcoming. In Cuba and Latin America, the vast majority of women have been taught not to repress their emotions, but to conceal them. It is not that women do not do their "things," take lovers for example; it is that they do it silently, without telling anybody. By presenting the case of Mayté Perdomo, who is capable of questioning her cultural values and traditions, Rivera-Valdés is not only presenting the mestiza subject, a subject whose cultural identity is not fixed and whose consciousness has traveled, but also describing cultural differences.

In "The Fifth River," another character, Catalina, who "gets paid to publicly analyze [her] own existence" and teaches workshops on sexuality, goes to see and tell Veneranda her forbidden story: her addiction to her neurotic female lover. Catalina, who discusses all the pretexts one finds to refrain our own desires - "If I had been born rich" and especially "If I had been a man" - is puzzled about her dependency to her. Moreover, she openly talks about what she has found in her recent lesbian relationship, heterosexual pattern behaviors. She perceives her lesbian lover as assimilated into what she had judged a masculine norm. The undesirable, as she argues, is not her homo-eroticism, but to be reproducing patriarchal codes, to be assimilated into phallogocentric behaviors, to be representing unwanted roles: her as the dependent and submissive female; her female lover as the verbally abusive partner.

It is not only unhappiness, the attraction for same sex people, or the perception of lesbianism as a sexual practice reduced to the terms that govern heterosexuality that torment these characters, but also any interest that grows apart from the established canons that are considered as "normal." In "La más prohibida de todas" ("The Most Forbidden of All"), Martirio does not consider herself as an amoral individual but "incapaz de cumplir con los requisites tradicionales impuestos a las mujeres denominadas 'decentes'" (117).[13] As Cuban literary critic Alonso Yodú suggests, we could probably find a referent for Martirio's sexual openness in her Caribbean cultural background since "para buena parte de los cubanos, ese pueblo gozador y extrovertido, (casi) todos los placeres del sexo son permitidos o al menos tolerados" (120).[14] It is probably because Martirio comes from a culture less hypocritical and repressive than North American society that she transgresses the limits of what Gayle Rubin has denominated "the charmed circle of sexuality." The dominant culture, according to feminist anthropologist Rubin, establishes a hierarchy in the field of sexual practices that doubly affects women:

---

[12] When I say that Mayté is a nomadic subject with a mestiza consciousness, it is not only because she was born in Cuba and lives now in the United States, but also because this displacement has taught her how to be critical about her own culture without being assimilated or feeling she completely belongs to the new society she is living in. Mayté is a subject who lives in "borderlands." she is, as poet Lourdes Casals writes, "too much a Cuban from Havana to be a New Yorker, too much a New Yorker to be or to even become anything else."

> Marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top of the erotic pyramid. Clamoring below are unmarried monogamous heterosexuals in couples, followed by most other heterosexuals. Solitary sex floats ambiguously [...] Stable, long term lesbian and gay male couples are verging on respectability, but bar dykes and promiscuous gay men are hovering just above the group at the very bottom of the pyramid. The most despised sexual castes currently include transsexuals, transvestites, fetishists, sado-masoquists, sexworkers such as prostitutes and porn models, and the lowliest of all, those whose eroticism transgresses generational boundaries. (12)

According to this hierarchy of what is considered "sexually correct," Martirio feels that her story ought to be "the most forbidden of all." She has surpassed the last threshold, that of a cross-generational relationship, but she admits that she has "disfrutado lo sucedido a plenitud, y lo asumo" (105).[15] Fortunately, Rivera-Valdés makes Martirio confront what could be considered her "dilemma" with a very wise reflexive decision: "Cuanto ser humano haya nacido, recapacité, durante el período de mi vida reproductiva, pudiera ser hijo o hija mía, pero yo ni parí ni crié a toda esa gente" (144).[16]

---

[13] In "La más prohibida de todas" ("The Most Forbidden of All"), Martirio does not consider herself as an amoral individual but incapable of "fulfill[ing] the traditional requirements imposed on so-called 'decent' women" (104).

[14] For the majority of Cubans, who are extrovert and hedonist people, all sexual pleasures are allowed or, at least, tolerated" (120).

[15] She admits that she has "fully enjoyed what happened, and [she] takes responsibility for it" (104).

[16] "Every human being born during the time span of my reproductive years, I thought again, could be my son or daughter, but I didn't gave birth to or raise any of them" (129).

But in "La más prohibida de todas" ("The Most Forbidden of All"), Martirio also talks about her interest in sexual toys, another taboo that has generated controversies in the field of the lesbian and gay studies, and discusses her sexual promiscuity that has pushed her to have several relationships that she does not regret. This very same character reveals to us her secret fetishism, her passion for the Cuban obscene sexual language. She confesses that "las relaciones sexuales con [mis amantes] me producían una tensión de espanto. [...] La banda sonora que aquellos individuos instalaban tan pronto comenzaba a quitarme la ropa, me horrorizaba, aunque a la verdad, también me encantaba" (111).[17] She continues by saying that, even though she perfectly knew her part in "the script," she could not answer her lovers back, so she remained silent any time she heard:

> Ábrete, mami, enséñale a tu papi todo lo que tienes guardadito entre las piernas y que tú sabes que es mío aunque te resistas. Déjame ver esa florecita que voy a comerme poquito a poco. Así. Dios mío que cosa más santa estoy viendo. […] No puedo creer que todo esto sea para mí solo. Ya verás que no vas a arrepentirte de habérmelo dado. Te voy a hacer gozar como jamas te ha hecho gozar nadie. […] Nadie va a hacértelo como yo, […] y a nadie vas a dárselo con el gusto que me lo estás dando a mí. Ven, ricura de mi vida, cielo santo. (114)[18]

Now, the switch in the story is not to hear how Martirio has learned to enjoy the sexual intercourse where "sin narratión no hubiera habido ni erecciones ni orgasmos" (112).[19] The switch is not in how she has learned to respond to those males' questionnaires, but that this "gusto" for the Cuban sexual language will be only fulfilled by another woman, Rocío, who knows what Martirio is going to say and what she needs to answer. The monologues Martirio had described to Marta

---

[17] "Having sex with these men produced a tension you can't believe, mainly because of the sound track those men turned on as soon I began to take off my clothes. It horrified me, although in truth it delighted me too" (98).

[18] Open up, mami, show your papi what you've got saved away for me between those little legs of yours. You know that it's mine even though you won't let me see it. Now let's see that little flower I'm going to eat right up, one itsy-bitsy taste at a time. […] Oh, God, what a blessed thing that is. […] I can't believe all this is just for me. You'll see you won't be sorry for giving it to me. You're going to like it like you've never liked it with anyone before. You'll never forget me, even if a hundred other men try to do for you what I'm doing now. Nobody will do you like I do. Nobody will enjoy it the way I do. You're never going to like giving it to anybody the way you like giving it to me. That's a girl, that's my treasure. Holy heaven, come on. (101)

[19] "I think that without the narration there would have been neither erections nor orgasms." (99)

Veneranda become well-articulated dialogues at the end of the story, but the performers are two female lovers. When Martirio finally meets Rocío, with her "tongue full of words [she is] no longer afraid to say" (130), she tells her lover: "abrete, rica, enséñale a tu mami todo lo que tienes guardadito entre las piernas y que tú sabes es mío aunquete resistas. Déjame ver esa florecita que voy a comerme poquito a poco." Then, Rocío answers her back: "Mírame bien, mi reina, estoy como tú me queries, para ti solita, para que me goces. Ahora tú me vas a dar a mí lo mismo. Deja los dedos donde los tienes y abre las piernas tú, déjame verte yo a ti ahora, fíjate lo Buena que soy yo contigo" (145).[20]

In "The Most Forbidden of All," the lesbian lovers take the language of "male desire" and erect it, but their act of love does not mimic completely the former heterosexual encounters described by Martirio. These two women lovers are not presented as man complements, but as articulated subjects who can explore the relations between language and subjectivity. This last love scene is not the reproduction of a phallogocentric discourse, but the representation of a dialogue that manages to be articulated within patriarchical discources since, as Gayatri Spivak assures, there is not pure position outside of phallogocentrism (4).[21] Thus Rivera-Valdés provides a starting point (with the only words she knows?) in the construction of other images and representations of women. Like French feminists, Rivera-Valdés is "committed to a deeper analysis of the interrelations between language, conceived as phallogocentric, and sexually specific types of subjectivity" (Grosz 39).

Certainly, it is in "La más prohibida" ("The Most Forbidden") where the most obvious connections between words and desire are established by Rivera-Valdés, but her searching (and finding" for a language that speaks about the female body and its specific pleasures is a constant in all the stories. This proximity to the body and the language of the body makes Rivera-Valdés' writing closer to an oral language tradition, explaining her so-called colloquial style. Other Caribbean

---

[20] Martirio: 'Open up, my beauty. Show your mami what you've got saved away for me between those little legs of yours. You know that it's mine even though you won't let me see it. Now let's see that little flower I'm going to eat right up, one itsy-bitsy taste at a time.' Rocío: 'Take a good look, my queen, I'm just the way you want me. Just for you alone, just for you to enjoy. Now you're going to offer me the same. Leave your fingers where they are and open up your legs. Let me take a good look at you now. You see how good I am to you, mami. That's how good you're going to be for me. Give it to me, mami. The same way as I'm giving to you.' (131)

[21] According to Spivak, there are not anti-phallogocentric terms free of patriarchy that could be used. For a better understanding of "the lesbians' control of the entire spectrum of language use," see "Sammy and Rose get Laid," by Spivak.

authors, such as Louise Benett with her radio monologues and Sistren Collective in Jamaica, have developed similar procedures. The type of language that these creators are using, which embodies the vision of the female world, is a confidential one and generates an immediate complicity between emissary and receptors, narrators and narrataries. In "La más prohibida" ("The Most Forbidden") narratary and reader, author and narratary, narrators and author overlap and/or are constantly superimposed. A good example is when Rivera-Valdés ascribes the creation of her next book (Historias de mujeres grandes y chiquitas) to the character Martirio, who is "author of several collections of short stories" (101). By the end of the book you perceive this work more as a modular novel than a collection of stories, you can find a character that lives in one story being mentioned in another. Elena is Iris' secretary and both of them are protagonists in different stories, yet if we look at the book as a unity their lives are interconnected. Iris is also a very close friend of Mayté. Mayté has lived a love story with Catalina, and Catalina knows Elena. In this way, and thanks to the mobility of these characters from one text to another, the interconnectivity of these pieces and understanding of the fictional universe presented in The Forbidden Stories grows broader.[22]

Beyond the enormous socio-cultural and linguistic specificity of Sonia Rivera-Valdés' Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda/The Forbidden Stories of Marta Veneranda and its characters (the New York Latinos), the stories told in this book do not lose relevance outside of this particular context. On the contrary, these "forbidden" stories are open to a plurality of audiences because "as a mestiza [literature this book has] no country, [its] homeland cast [it] out; yet all countries are its" (Anzaldúa 80). Like Anzaldúa, Rivera-Valdés is also actively participating in the creation of an alternative and feminist culture, which is committed to the transformation of the patriarchal society and its myth about women. Rivera-Valdés' alliance with these emerging figurations of the female subjectivity (the nomadic and the mestiza) transforms her into the travel companion of many other creators and thinkers who in history, literature, fine arts, philosophy, and political activism are tracing a radically new map of the diverse world of women.

---

[22] I am tempted to use a term created by Adrienne Rich in the 1980s, but that has been overthrown from the most recent feminist theories, "the lesbian continuum." This term extends the idea of female identification with other females in order to include "the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny [and] the giving and receiving of patriarchal and political support" (Rich 239). Several theorists have argued that this idea dilutes the material differences between the existence of lesbian and heterosexual women, and that this term reduces entity to lesbianism as sexual practice. But certainly, beyond their diverse sexual orientations, the narrators of Las historias prohibidas/The Forbidden Stories create a sorority chain. Throughout all the stories we find infinite examples of solidarity, like Yocasta re-opening her husband's oxygen valve in order to create the illusion of natural death, like the narrator of "Los venenitos" welcoming Fermina, her husband lover, in her home, or the protagonist in "Los ojos lindos de Adela" affirming: "Una cosa no puedes dudar. Si digo que voy a ayudarte, sabes que lo harés" (83). This is the profound ethical commitment that underlies all the stories and that allows us to recognize these characters' feminist and/or subversive behavior.

Works Cited

Alonso Yodu, Odette. "Mujer ante el espejo. La presencia lesbiana en la literature."Conversation entre escritoras del Caribe hispano. New York: Centra de Estudios Puertorriquenos (CUNY), 2000. 117- 23

Anzaldúa, Gloria. Preface. Borderlands/La frontera. The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

------. "La conciencia de la mestiza. Towards a New Consciousness." Borderlands/La frontera. The New Mestiza. San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987.

Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." Image-Music-Text. Trans. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana, 1977. 142-48.

Bejel, Emilio. "Crossing Gender and National Boundaries." Gay Cuban Nation. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2001. 211-34

Braidotti, Rossi. "By Way of Nomadism." Introduction. Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory. New York: Columbia UP, 1994.

de Lauretis, Teresa. "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness." Feminist Studies 16. 1 (1990): 115-159.

Grosz, Elizabeth. "Julia Kristeva and the Speaking Subject." Sexual Subversions. Three French Feminists. Sydney: Alien and Unwin, 1989. 39-68

Rivera-Valdés, Sonia. Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda. New York: Seven Stories P, 2000.

-----. The Forbidden Stories of Marta Veneranda. Trans. Dick Cluster et al. New York: Seven Stories P, 2001.

Rich, Adrienne. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michele A. Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 227-54.

Rubin, Gayle. "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality." The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michele A. Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 3-44.

Spacks, Patricia M. The female Imagination. New York: Knopf, 1975.

Spivak, Gayatri. "Women, Intellectuals and Power: An Interview." Thesis XI 9. 1984/85.

-----. "Sammy and Rosie Get Laid." Outside in the Teaching Machine. New York: Routledge, 1993. 243-54.