El diálogo perfecto: The Language of Lesbian Love in Sonia Rivera Valdés's Cuban-American Confessions

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Resumo
De acordo com a omnipresença dos tropos homoeróticos os quais sostêm o imaginário nacional, a exclusão das vozes *queer* do discurso oficial cubano resulta paradoxal, a continuada invisibilidade de uma Cuba lésbica na literatura e na história da Ilha reforça a tenacidade das interpretações androcêntricas d nação. Este artículo examina alguns dos assuntos políticos relacionados com a escritura de uma Cuba lésbica. Establece algumas das preocupações essenciais do emergente discurso lésbico forxado interna e diaspóricamente; assim também, coloca os conflitos através de uma leitura da narrativa confessional de Sonia Rivera-Valdés, produzida nos Estados Unidos. Assim, exploram-se, desde as perspectivas de identidades lesbianas múltiplas, tanto o passado colonial de Cuba, como o governo de Castro e a reconstrução cultural dos últimos anos da década de 1990. Principalmente, as confessões ficticias propõem uma viagem desde o monólogo heterosexista até o diálogo lésbico, entendido como um mecanismo de construção de narrativa nacional.
Palabras-chave: Cuba lésbica, Estados Unidos, Sonia Rivera-

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Valdés

Resumen
Dada la omnipresencia de los tropos homoeróticos que sostienen el imaginario nacional, la exclusión de las voces *queer* del discurso oficial cubano resulta paradójica, la continuada invisibilidad de una Cuba lésbica en la literatura y la historia de la Isla refuerza la tenacidad de las interpretaciones androcéntricas de la nación. Este artículo examina algunos de los asuntos políticos relacionados con la escritura de una Cuba lésbica. Establece algunas de las preocupaciones esenciales del floreciente discurso lésbico forjado interna y diaspóricamente; asimismo, pone de manifiesto los conflictos concomitantes a través de una lectura de la narrativa confesional de Sonia Rivera-Valdés, producida en los Estados Unidos. Así pues, se exploran, desde las perspectivas de identidades lesbianas múltiples, tanto el pasado colonial de Cuba, como el gobierno de Castro y la reconstrucción cultural de los últimos años de la década de 1990. Principalmente, las confesiones ficticias proponen un viaje desde el monólogo heterosexista hasta el diálogo lésbico, entendido como un mecanismo de construcción narrativa y nacional.
Palabras Claves: Cuba lésbica, los Estados Unidos, Sonia Rivera-Valdés.

Abstract
If, given the pervasiveness of homoerotic tropes which underpin the national imaginary, the exclusion of queer voices from official Cuban discourse is paradoxical, the continuing invisibility of a lesbian Cuba in the island's literature and history reinforces the tenacity of androcentric understandings of the nation. This paper examines some of the political issues involved in writing a lesbian Cuba. It establishes some of the major preoccupations of a burgeoning lesbian discourse forged at home and in the disapora and demonstrates the related conflicts through a reading of Sonia Rivera-Valdés's confessional narratives produced 96in the USA. Cuba's colonial past, the Castro regime and the

cultural reconstruction of the late 1990s are all explored from the perspectives of multiple lesbian identities. Most crucially, the fictional confessions propose a journey from heterosexist monologue to lesbian dialogue as the mechanism for narrative and national construction.
Key Words: Lesbian Cuba, the United States, Sonia Rivera-Valdés.

Sonia Rivera-Valdés's *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* (2000) presents a series of intricate, multiply layered psychological portraits of (mainly) Cuban immigrants living in New York city in the last four decades of the twentieth century. These portraits are scandalous. As the title of the collection suggests they are narrative expositions of forbidden territories. In nine therapeutic confessions the different informants reveal sexual infidelity, filial transgression, duplicitous silences and even murder. At the core of this collection of confessional texts, the narrator informs us, is a desire to explore the concept of the forbidden, to investigate the extent and precise nature of people's secrets and to assess the gap between the actual and perceived seriousness of the prohibited act and the associated crises of guilt. The premise of the fictional investigation implies a tension between past and present, between perception and actuality and between concealment and declaration: 'Es decir, una persona oculta un capítulo de su pasado, más por la forma cómo lo ha percibido y sentido que por la mayor o menor carga de delito o desaprobación social del episodio en sí (p. 5).

A perceived sexual aberration of some kind is germane to all the stories and all except one presents a character grappling with shame, trauma, fear, anger or regret associated with male or female homosexual sex. Crucially, the protagonists in their confessions all associate desire, notions of sexual propriety and

sexual guilt with their sense of what it is to be Cuban and their understanding of the way migration to the United States has transformed their sexual options and attitudes. The propriety, moral values and coherent sense of themselves learned in Cuba, they believe, have been de-centred by the move to the United States. The resultant crisis of misrecognition, that is, misrecognition of self occasioned by migration is what leads all the character to seek help from the therapist Marta Veneranda to whom they relate their sexual indiscretions and, in at least one case, possible criminal activity.

In 'El olor del desenfreno', for example, the confession of Rodolfo, the 'happily married' speaker/protagonist, is his inexplicable attraction towards and penetrative sexual encounter with an immensely fat neighbour who gave off a horribly fetid smell. According to Rodolfo, his neighbour 'pesa cerca de cuatrocientas libras... es inmensamente gorda' (p.31). Far more than her size, however, Rodolfo is profoundly disturbed by the fact that her extraordinarily repugnant body odour became, in a moment of madness, a source of irresistible sexual attraction to him. The scandalously repulsive smell almost becomes a second protagonist in the story. Locked out of her own apartment and in serious practical difficulties, the neighbour is invited into Rodolfo's house until a solution is found to her mini crisis. And the odour of putrefaction accompanies her.

> '...irrumpió en la casa una fetidez horrible. Muy fuerte. El olor más fuerte que he olido en mi vida. Un poco agrio y algo salado, tal vez parecido al de las conchas marinas en descomposición a la orilla de una playa, cuando han estado al sol por varios días… No se había bañado en una semana, por lo menos. Sentí náuseas, se lo juro, tan fuerte

era la peste.

The detailed marine metaphors that Rodolfo uses to describe the smell emanating from the woman are a clue as to the eventual psychological condition that will be used to explain the supposedly inexplicable attraction. Rodolfo grew up near the sea in Jaimanitas, Havana Cuba before he was severed from his family and social milieu as one of the casualties of Operation Peter Pan [1]. The sea is the location of his sexual awakening in Cuba and it is the site which is most viscerally connected with the loss of the Cuban homeland, the stability which it constituted and the hygiene (physical and moral) with which he associates his *cubanidad*. Operation Peter Pan was the psychological undoing of many people Rodolfo suggests, 'Esa operación desgració a más gente...' (p.29). In his own case, childhood security in coastal Cuba in a family in which he was pampered is abruptly transformed into a loveless and peripatetic displaced adolescence in the United States.

> ¿Qué si lo pasé mal? Negras. Con tres familias estuve viviendo. No me aguantaba nadie y yo no los aguantaba a ellos. Usted sabe cómo son los chiquitos cubanos de malcriados, y caer así de paracaidistas en un sitio desconocido, una cultura tan distinta, otra lengua. No quiero acordarme (p.29).

The moment of rupture from the past and the details of his inceptive sexuality are repressed. It is only when his parents join him in the USA and a semblance of normality is returned to his life that Rodolfo 's memory returns to his Cuban sweetheart and their romantic trysts by the sea. If a utopian Cuban childhood and the trauma of Peter Pan serve as 'symbolic sources for Rodolfo's adult passions' (BEJEL, 2001, p.34) they are also responsible for the complex of guilt which he suffers upon actualizing those

sexual passions. Cuba like Rodolfo's sexuality is a troubling paradox in the story. Curiously, Rodolfo attributes his disdain for foul smells completely to his identity as Cuban. This is one of many hints in the confessions of the confusion between norm and nationhood. For Cubans, Rodolfo remarks in anguish, 'tener peste es un pecado capital' (p.27). Sexual transgression is therefore simultaneously national betrayal. National identity as well as sexual pleasure evokes both gratification and pain, necessarily involves a staging of both disgust and desire. Operation Peter Pan was ostensibly meant to ensure that parents did not lose their children to the socialist state but in practice it instigated some of the most extensive and irreparable filial rifts by entrusting these Cuban children to the care of strangers in capitalist USA thousands of miles away from their parents. But Rodolfo's adult crisis in the USA is as much a function of pre-revolutionary Judeo-Christian morality as it is of post-revolutionary socialist philosophies of moral hygiene, both of which in certain ways bear troubling resemblances to conservative North American notions of 'family values'. In his attempt to return to the wholesome utopia of the Cuban past Rodolfo enmeshes himself in its antithesis, the putrid dystopia of the North American present. The sea full of shellfish is the sign in the text of a pristine romance and it is also the symbol of the putrid sex of his obese American neighbour.

Struggles with heterosexuality and a concomitant alienation from patterns of identity associated with a Cuban past feature elsewhere in the collection. In an ironic reversal of the more general pattern of the Cuban-American 'coming out' narrative, Ángel, the protagonist of 'Desvaríos' (pp.55-64) who learns his sexuality (essentially a desire for black men) in a privileged childhood in pre-revolutionary Cuba finds

that in adulthood he has been overcome with an obsession for heterosexual pornography. So consumed he is that he considers placing a lonely hearts advertisement seeking a woman lover. This is tantamount to infidelity to his partner Matthew of six years who in an effort to stimulate Ángel's flagging libido had first introduced pornography into their sex lives. An assumed fixed homosexuality and attendant regimes of fidelity are thus brought into crisis as 'sexual fluidity... situation-dependent flexibility' (DIAMOND, 2008, p.3) transforms the vagina from a redundant concept into an indispensable aspect of Ángel's sexual fantasy, an image without which he is unable to achieve an orgasm during sex with his homosexual lover. For Ángel, the insatiable cravings for women which he begins to have in middle age constitute a kind of mental impairment (desavríos) which imply both identitarian and moral crises. Heterosexual fantasy thus becomes a source of dual betrayal.

However the taboos with which Rivera-Valdés is principally concerned in *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranada* have to do with female bisexuality, lesbian erotic desire, and its potential to disrupt the hetero-normative codes which govern the Cuban and Cuban-American communities out of which the protagonists are drawn. According to Emilio Bejel 'the lesbian transgressions may be the most remarkable in the book due to the scandalous nature of their rupture and the strictness of the code they transgress' (BEJEL, 227). In the rest of this essay I would like to address some of the issues raised in one of these fictional elaborations of transgressive lesbian love, the penultimate story 'La más prohibida de todas' (pp. 105 -145). In my analysis I highlight Rivera-Valdés's exploration of sex as essentially a verbal process and show the challenges posed to hetero-normative discourse as a failure of language

which is replaced by a woman-centred utopian communicative sexuality. I conclude by making a few observations concerning the version of lesbian love that is presented in a rewriting of 'La más prohibidas de todas' which appears in a collection of stories, published three years later, entitled *Historias de mujeres grandes y chiquitas* (2003).

Lesbians and the Cuban Nation

The prevailing discussion on the place of lesbians in Caribbean society points to their invisibility in public discourse. Commentators point to the stubborn refusal on the part of both official and popular culture in the region to accord lesbians their rightful place as citizens and highlight the belligerent stances which deny them space for self-definition. Lesbian sexuality in effect disqualifies women from full communal or national identity. That is to say lesbians' labour, production and, in many cases, reproduction are drawn upon by the state as indispensable resources but the reciprocal duty of state recognition is never fulfilled. Lesbians therefore must routinely compartmentalize their identities, isolate body from soul in order to participate safely in national life. In her highly moving and groundbreaking essay on the subject the Jamaican writer Makeda Silvera highlights the biblically derived punitive nomenclature used to vilify lesbian sexuality and enforce silence and self-denial. The terms 'sodomite' and 'man royal' are 'dread words. So dread that women dare not use them to name themselves (SILVERA, 1991, p.14). Silenced by the homophobic regimes at home, lesbians in the Caribbean diaspora in Europe and North America find themselves objects of fear and suspicion by both men and black heterosexual women (p.21). Lesbians have worked in the black

liberation struggles since the 1960s, Silvera reminds, only to have their work undermined and the validity of their revolutionary or black cultural credentials questioned once the lesbian aspect of their identity is declared, whether voluntarily or through coercion. For an Afro-Caribbean immigrant woman a declaration of lesbian identity is tantamount to jettisoning the only credibility (the privilege of heterosexuality) she has in North-American metropolitan society and this becomes a frightening prospect for heterosexual women who fear labelling by association and therefore distance themselves from their lesbian sisters (p,21).

If in 1991 Silvera called on Caribbean gays and lesbians to take up the challenge to reverse their invisibility by naming themselves and claiming their 'space within the larger history of Afro-Caribbean peoples' (p.26), Rosamund King, writing fourteen years later, believes that since 'the moment of Silvera's essay lesbians '...have become more invisible in the Caribbean, gone more underground because of the increasingly vocal homophobia of our cultures' (GLAVES, 2008, p.192). The conviction held by many in the region that migration is the only escape route to the possibility of an openly lesbian life is, for King, also a factor that contributes to the perpetual invisibility of lesbians in the Caribbean. In an attempt to locate the contemporary invisibility of lesbians in Cuba within a diachronic context, Cuban writer Mabel Cuesta recalls the vituperative dismissal of lesbianism in the 1920s by the radical feminist writer and activist Mariblanca Sabás Alomá (1901 – 1983). Sabás Alomá's denunciation of lesbianism as a 'disgusting worm eating away at women' in Cuba marks, for Cuesta, a significant point in the exclusion of lesbians from both orthodox and radical feminism on the island. Lesbians as a result, Cuesta suggests, have not participated in the emancipatory projects for women in

either pre or post revolutionary Cuba (GLAVES, pp. 136 -137). It is extremely ironic that Sabás Alomá who was so much at odds with the state on a range of issues concerning gender and the rights of women should coincide so precisely with its ideological position on lesbian identity and practice.[2] Of course Cuesta is not entirely correct that lesbians have not participated in the emancipatory political projects of pre and post revolutionary Cuba. The point is that they have not participated as lesbians. This is partly because of the discriminatory delegitimization of the lesbian as citizen. This official position on lesbians in Cuba has at times been replicated in the lived experience of lesbians and their own conceptualization of lesbian identity. One of the points made by Lourdes Arguelles and B. Ruby Rich in their 1984 report on homosexuality and homophobia in Cuba is that in pre-revolutionary Cuba even for homosexuals 'erotic loyalty' to the opposite sex was considered the norm. For many people in this era homosexuality was either an 'addendum to customary marital roles' or a 'profitable commodification of sexual fantasy' (ARGUELLES and RICH, 1984, p.688). But lesbians also have not participated in society as lesbians because at different stages they themselves have collaborated with the maintenance of the status quo. This is an observation that Ian Lumsden makes in his discussion of the institutionalization of homophobia within the Castro revolution. He argues that the first (and in some cases only) women in high profile positions in the revolutionary government occupied positions that endorsed traditional female roles and that many of the 'lesbians who played important roles in the clandestine urban struggle' were themselves '*machista*' (LUMSDEN, 1996, p.61).

While for some scholars the prospects for lesbians

and black lesbians in particular continue to be rather bleak in Cuba, Mabel Cuesta demonstrates a cautious optimism that the oppressive dominance of hetero-normativity in Cuba has been shifting in recent years. [3] Cuesta draws on both personal anecdote and official evidence as the background against which to express her tentative hope for a more inclusive future for lesbians within the nation. From her analysis, this transition (it certainly cannot be called a revolution) seems to be occurring from the bottom up as popular attitudes anticipate institutional structures and policies aimed at eliminating homophobia. At the level of mass media Cuesta mentions two *telenovelas* since the late 1990s which have incorporated lesbian storylines. Though circumscribed and partial in their representation, she seems to suggest, the fact that they are made visible indicates a significant opening up of the subject (p.139) and, I would add, a declaration that Cuban lesbians exist.

But the most telling aspect of what Mabel Cuesta offers as evidence of the visible shift in attitudes towards lesbians in Cuba today is her account of the physical support she and her lover Clara received from young men in their neighbourhood when they started building a room for themselves. The men described as 'handsome, very strong ... macho' (p.132) not only help to transport the building materials but keep an eye on the progress of the construction and inquire when the owners will be moving in (p.140). This is a concrete example of an emergent transformation of the attitude of the 'macho' to the lesbian, that figure who erases completely his sexual relevance and power within society. The event is a suggestion of quotidian alliances and community between heterosexual and lesbian constituencies of the nation. 'They know who we are and they know why we want to build our room', Cuesta tells us, 'nonetheless, glowing,

cheerful and cooperative ... they carried our construction materials for us' (p.132). For lesbians in Cuba building a room of their own is a powerful symbol, one that carries with it very potent suggestions of transgression. A room of their own implies not just a private place for sexual pleasure. A private place for sex carries a high premium in Cuba where an acute shortage of housing and the attendant crisis of space means that it is not unusual for several generations of married couples to live under one roof. In a state that endorses heterosexual marriage and which is as best extremely dubious about the concept of lesbian sexuality, facilitating same sex relationships between women is never going to be a priority. If state assistance to alleviate the housing crisis for model (heterosexual) citizens is extremely difficult to materialise for deviants (lesbians and others) it is next to impossible. Building a room of their own replaces reliance on the androcentric state with feminist self reliance. More importantly it is a public declaration of lesbian sexuality and the construction of a lesbian household.

The complexities of space for sex, homosexuality and the construction of an alternative household as a site of ideological challenge are some of the questions which are raised in Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's much discussed 1994 film Fresa y *chocolate*. Itself framed in and partly perpetuating hetero-normative narratives of the nation, *Fresa y chocolate* nevertheless was an early indication of the shift in cultural priorities of the revolution which coincided with the economic crisis of the 1990s. The glimpses of progress towards dismantling institutional homophobia which are now becoming increasingly apparent are already in evidence in the 1990s. This decade saw cultural institutions facilitating the re-writing of the nation through prioritizing the emergence of a variety of themes and subjectivities which for the first

three decades of the revolution were taboo. Race, sexuality and the role of Cuban-Americans are just three examples of social questions which enjoyed a revisionist attitude in this shake up of the cultural/aesthetic map. Sonia Rivera Valdés's *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* is partly to be understood in this context. The collection won the Casa de las Américas prize in 1997 and was published in Cuba that year with the US edition appearing three years later. As Bejel is careful to point out, since Lourdes Casal won the Casa de las Américas prize in 1981 for her collection of poetry *Palabras juntan revolución* more than thirty five years earlier, Sonia Rivera-Valdés was the only other Cuban-American to receive that honour (BEJEL, p. 218). This speaks rather eloquently to the shift in official attitudes that I have been discussing above. At the level of the cultural institution of literature this signalled the insertion of the Cuban-American lesbian voice into the national discourse. But it also confirms Rivera-Valdés's success in transcending the stale factionalism which too often permeates cultural production on both sides of the Cuban American divide. Yvonne Yarbo-Berjano has noted the potential for queer Cuban-American texts to perform the taboo of ambivalence and thereby distance themselves from hardened polarities on authentic Cuban identity (YARBO-BERJANO, 2000, p.201). This ambivalence also challenges the conventional wisdom which Arguelles and Rich observed in the 1980s within 'North American gay academic circles' (p.683) and which unfortunately is still observable today, that post 1959 migration of gay Cubans stems exclusively from the homophobia of the Castro regime. The stories in *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda* eclipse the hackneyed pattern of the oppressed Cuban homosexual finding freedom in a more liberal urban USA. Rivera-Valdés's transcendence of a binary nationalist vision has implications for the treatment of queer female sexuality in more

general terms. The imagination of lesbian sexuality in the texts coincide with what Kuar Puar, Rushbrook and Schein (2003) refer to as the privileging of 'transversal circuitry alliances' in contemporary explorations of the politics of sexuality and space (p.383). In her stories, therefore, the United States does not appear as an uncomplicated privileged site to which queer Cuban fiction might turn in order to stage and resolve the nation's queer psychosexual crises.

From Heterosexual Monologue to Lesbian Dialogue

'Las más prohibida de todas' exposes the multiple disappointments in heterosexual romance experienced by Martirio, the protagonist/speaker. The sexual relationships which she has with men throughout her youth and adulthood are at best unsatisfactory and at worst occasions of psychological crisis. Romantic failure occurs at many levels in the protagonist's sexual past and is nuanced variously according to geography, class, age, national origin or libidinal idiosyncrasy of the male lovers with whom she comes into contact. What unites all these heterosexual and in some cases heterosexist episodes however is a problem of language. The narrator's confessions act as a way of structuring various aspects of her life especially her history of desire. Her story is essentially one of migratory female subjects who engage in a tripartite crossing from Europe to the Caribbean and then to the United States. It is a story that locates the roots of the protagonist in Spain of the civil war, her birth in Cuba during the first republic and her youth and maturation (psychological and sexual) in the United States from the late 1950s to the early 1990s. Before she is born, Martirio's father is executed during the Spanish civil war and in order to escape the tragedy of memory her pregnant mother flees to Cuba where she is born. Precipitous political circumstances and the desire to

escape Havana temporarily in an attempt to abate her perpetual depression mother and daughter set sail to New York for a brief holiday two months before the Batista regime collapses. It would be years before Martirio would return. So Martirio's life begins in rupture. National implosion and familial trauma are the context of her birth and this anxiety of inception and subsequent social difficulty transform her mother into something of a silent and tragic figure. The psychological dependency of her mother's character, Martirio will subsequently come to realise, is partly responsible for some of the misplaced romantic choices she (Martirio) makes in adulthood.

As Katherine Suggs (2003) has shown, Cuban-American lesbian narratives are a prime location for the intersection of histories of diaspora and histories of desire. The story that Martirio narrates to Marta Veneranda is one such example. Martirio's sexual trajectory has two parallel components. There is the prolific sexual youth with primarily older men, some of whom are married. Self-obsessed men, jealous wives who threaten to beat her and disconnected boredom are some of the details of this unfulfilled sexual life in Cuba. Then there is the romantic ideal of the disappointed woman gleaned from Hollywood Romances which serves as a desired escape from the drudgery of life and love in 1950s Havana. The culminating disaster of Martirio's heterosexual history is a disappointing marriage to an Irishman called Mark who she meets one St Patrick's Day which is also the anniversary of her mother's attempted suicide.

All her romantic failures are engendered by a lack of reciprocity in language. They constitute a debilitating and at times abusive sexist monologue. In the worst cases they imply a necessary silencing of the protagonist concerning her

sexual past. With Mark conjugal stability is predicated upon the truncation of woman's personal history, a mutilation of the protagonist's present and a renunciation of her past. Mark talks freely to Martirio about his past sexual life and, in fact, it is this openness that first attracts her to him. However very soon in the marriage she realises that he discourages her revelation of her sexual past, banning her story and effectively silencing her. Profoundly uncomfortable with the fact that Martirio has had a prolific sexual life which predates their marriage, he tells her: 'Yo sé que tuviste algunas relaciones antes de la nuestra, pero prefiero no comentarlas. Tu pasado ya pasó. Me importa el presente, que es el que compartimos (p.127).

The inequitable rules of speech and silence within marriage become too much for Martirio who, as a writer, must love in words s much as or more than in deed and this precipitates their divorce. Women in the story are associated with a more liberated approach to language. Storytelling, for example, is what makes the mother's tragic personality bearable. The very structure of the narrative is meant to highlight the textual priority of female engendered reciprocity in language. What became the collection of stories, Marta Veneranda explains in her clarifying note at the beginning , was to be a scientific investigation which would lead to a doctorate in sociology. The 'rigor científico' on which her supervisor Professor Haley insists however does not coincide with her own passion to listen to people's heartfelt stories and so she abandons the project and collects the stories instead. The pleasure of language and the belief in the validity of the individual's unfettered declaration of the details of the soul therefore supercede the prescriptive (patriarchal) science endorsed by the US academy. Confession becomes a crucial creative experiment in 'La más prohibida de todas'. There is

a fundamental need for an interlocutor and Martirio's opening declaration to Marta Veneranda confirms that the urgency to tell, to reveal in order to create is the principle that frames the story.

> Quiero hablar sin editarme, sin pensar si lo que estoy diciendo está bien o mal, correcto o incorrecto, sin censura. Lo importante es contarlo todo. Necesito ganar perspectiva antes de emprender mi trabajo (p.106).

In 'La más prohibida de todas' the protagonist/ narrator grows out of fascination with men into a maturity of love for other women. The narrative tracks the transition from heterosexual infatuation to homosexual/lesbian romance as a trajectory of development from youthful fascination into identity maturation. Emilio Bejel is correct in his observation that lesbianism also evolves in the text as deriving from 'the widespread myth that situates lesbian desire as a response to romantic disillusionment with men (BEJEL, p.230). However this is not a simplistic discovery of lesbian joy to replace the tribulations of heterosexuality. Part of the maturation that lesbian love entails for the narrator is the knowledge that relationships between women at times repeat the same power dynamics as those with men. And she admits relationships with women cast her 'a un mar de conflictos emocionales pavorosos' (p.131).

In her youth in Cuba Martirio engages in a highly vocal heterosexuality. The problem she admits is that what ought to have been dialogue ended up as repetitive monologues in which she was neither able to nor interested in intervening. But while she does not participate in the conversation the words become the principal attraction, the pivotal events which she anticipates

during the many trysts with her sexual partners. Without words, she tells Marta Veneranda 'no hubiera habido ni erecciones ni orgasmos' (p.112). The linguistic extravaganza staged by one particular lover remains deeply etched in Martirio's memory.

> Ábrete, mami, enséñale a tu papi todo lo que tienes guardadito entre las piernas y que tú sabes es mío aunque te resistas. Déjame ver esa florecita que voy a comerme poquito a poco. Así. Díos mío que cosa más santa estoy viendo. Así… así. No puedo creer que todo esto sea para mí solo. Ya verás que no vas a arrepentirte de habérmela dado. Te voy a hacer gozar como jamás te ha hecho gozar nadie. No vas a olvidarme nunca, aunque cien más traten de hacerte lo que yo te estoy haciendo…Ven, ricura de mi vida, cielo santo (p.114).

Martirio receives and records but is unable to translate these moments into a participatory erotics. There is no reciprocity and so monologue never develops into dialogue. Only decades later and with a younger Cuban woman lover/writer does Martirio find the sexual reciprocity which eludes her throughout her youth and most of her adulthood. Repeating the same script that she learns as a young woman she is astounded that her young lover not only knows the script but is poised to improvise, rewrite in order to optimise linguistic and sexual pleasure.

> Sentadas una encima de la otra, frente a frente, coloqué una mano en cada muslo suyo y los fui separando mientras le decía en voz baja y despacio:
>
> Ábrete, rica, enséñale a tu mami todo lo que tienes guardadito entre las piernas y que tú sabes que es mío aunque resistas….
>
> Abrió las piernas siguiendo el juego, dócil, húmeda y dejó

> entrar mis manos mirándo a los ojos. Entonces susurró:
>
> Mírame bien, mi reina, estoy como tú me querías, para ti solita, para que me goces. Ahora tú me vas a dar a mí lo mismo (p.145).

The power of language to define, control, redefine and liberate is as fundamental to living as it is to loving. Sonia Rivera-Valdés is acutely aware of this and this is a fundamental concern in all the stories in *Las historias prohibidas de Marta Veneranda*. In a set of confessions that feature betrayal, deceit and 'husband murder tales' it is a story that carves out an equitable space for female dialogic participation that is the 'most forbidden of all'. With her young writer lover Martirio becomes co-participant in 'el diálogo perfecto que ... había vislumbrado hacía cuarenta años pero del cual no había tenido certeza...' (p.145). Creating female initiated dialogue is the ultimate jouissance. Martirio, Marta Veneranda and Sonia Rivera-Valdés seem to suggest that lesbian lingual reciprocity is the sweetest taboo.

Conclusión

The complexity with which Rivera-Valdés writes Cuban lesbian identities is evidenced in her subsequent re-writing of 'La más prohibida de todas' in a collection of stories which she alludes to when she speaks to Marta Veneranda. The new version of the story 'La semilla más Honda del limón' which appears in *Historias de mujeres grandes y chiquitas* (2003, pp. 167 – 196) owes its title to the bitterness which is associated with Rocío, the young Cuban lover with whom Martirio had found the perfect dialogue earlier. In this new story utopia becomes dystopia and dialogue degenerates into diatribe. Global politics and local economics are the political and narrative occasions

used to enunciate this rupturing of lesbian utopia in the text. A disagreement over the validity of the actions of the US in the first gulf war precipitates a definitive showdown to end what had been for a while a tense relationship. Rocío it emerges has returned to sleeping with a man on the island while her female lover Martirio who resides in New York provides her with economic support. What is significant about the infidelity is not the act of sex but the identification with the man, who is poor and lives in Cuba and the concomitant distancing from and disapprobation of Martirio in nationalist and economic terms: 'El es como yo y me dio su comida/¿que quieres decir con, 'es como yo', que vive aquí?/Eso mismo, y que porque vive aqui a veces tiene hambre' (p.173).

The story locates lesbian desire within the discourse of sex and economics in Cuba of the late 1990s. It opens up the possibilities for an exploration of lesbian participation in the discourse and politics of jineterismo. Despite the extensive fictional and scholarly enterprise that has been spawned by the phenomenon of jineterismo since the 1990s very little consideration has been given to the complex political and narrative implications raised by the figure of the lesbian jinetera. Rivera-Valdés's story offers a range of powerful suggestions concerning these implications. In 'Las más prohibida de todas' there is an elision of national politics. 'La semilla más honda del limón' inserts politics decidedly into the narrative of lesbian romance and thereby ruptures it. Part of this political conflict concerns the local/global, passive/dynamic, poor/economically secure dialectic that is sometimes used to understand Caribbean relations with the developed world. In 'La semilla más honda del limón' it seems to me that these positions are infinitely complicated and it is the experienced cosmopolitan figure rather than the local characters who at a certain level is undone by romantic

naivete. But there are even more complex political issues in this story concerning authority, freedom and duplicitous bisexuality. There is obviously no scope to disentangle these complex issues here. What Sonia Rivera-Valdés's stories reveal with unparalleled lucidity, however, is that Cuban-American lesbian identities are themselves fraught with issues of power and place but that it is still important to write towards that lesbian utopia wherever it might be.

Notas

1 For a detailed study of this phenomenon, its political context and consequences see Yvonne Conde *Operation Pedro Pan: The Untold Exodus of 14, 000 Cuban Children* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

2 She was imprisoned in the 1930s for her political activities.

3 See for example Tanya Saunders's assessment of the situation in her discussion of 'Black Lesbians and Racial Identity in Cuba' (2010).

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