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María Elena Olivera Córdova*

Wake up, my love! The Lesbian Stories of Victoria Enríquez and Elena Madrigal[1]

That general is a beast, coronel, sir. That's how I should address you, right?
Or do you prefer to be called coronel, ma'am?
Victoria Enríquez, "De un pestañazo"
(While Napping)

Women have made the long trek in Mexican narrative from their first incursions in writing until today. Along the way, they have not only won the right to write, but also to touch on topics that did not seem appropriate to their femininity. One of those inappropriate topics was socio-sexuality and eroticism. These issues have been explored by women writers above all since the 1950s, and we should emphasize that they have received an interesting impetus and an unprecedented direction with the arrival of the Sapphic theme through "the feminine pen," as we will see later on, taking as a sample certain stories of openly lesbian authors: Victoria Enríquez and Elena Madrigal.

More than novels, what have proliferated in lesbian narrative are short stories; many are scattered in different feminist and homosexual periodicals, and others have been published in anthologies or in collections by a single author. Rosamaría Roffiel, the author of Mexico's first lesbian novel, published a book of short stories titled *El para siempre dura una noche* (Forever Lasts a Single Night) (2001), in which not all the stories are Sapphic. By contrast, in 1997, Victoria Enríquez published her book of lesbian short

* Olivera works in the Social Sciences and Literature Program of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Science and the Humanities (CEIICH), UNAM, and is an editor specialized in feminism and gender; you can contact her at olivera@unam.mx.

stories, *Con fugitivo paso* (With a Fugitive Stride);[2] Elena Madrigal published *Contarte en lésbico* (Telling You in Lesbian) in 2010;[3] and one of the youngest writers, Artemisa Téllez, published hers in 2005 (*Un encuentro y otros* [One Encounter and Others]). Among the authors whose stories have appeared in periodicals or anthologies are Ivonne Cervantes ("Luz Bella" [Beautiful Light]) in 2000, and Karina Vergara ("Dicen" [They Say]) in 2008, to mention just a few. Their work in configuring lesbian experiences tends increasingly toward the quest for freedom, the playful fictionalization of the stories, and less and less toward denunciation and justification.

Perhaps as a corollary to the growing ideological atomization of feminists and lesbians, since the 1990s, novels of the dyke milieu emphasize the individual and not the community, which had been a trend in the 1970s. However, in this period, writers like Rosamaría Roffiel and Victoria Enríquez have gone back to aspects of communities of women in some of their stories.

"El día en que quedaron mudas las estrellas" (The Day the Stars Were Struck Dumb) and "La canción de la luna sobre la barda" (Song of the Moon over the Wall), the first two stories of *Con fugitive paso*... are nostalgic looks back at the ideals that gave cohesion to the feminist and lesbian movements of the 1970s. In them, Enríquez recreates the female community and solidarity. By contrast in her stories "No gracias, mi amor" (No Thank You, My Love) and "De un pestañazo" (While Napping), the author creates transvestite or transsexual characters who at that time didn't fit in the ranks of feminism.[4] "No gracias, mi amor" is a short tale of the misunderstanding that ensues when a lesbian girl tries to hook up in a club with a very beautiful women who turns out to be trans.

"De un pestañazo" situates the action during the Mexican Revolution. The main character, a cross-dressing woman, is inspired by a real person: Coronel Amelio(a) Robles. In this story, the narrator —we never know if it is a man or a woman— tells us about how, in his old age, retired to a quiet life, Coronel Ansiedad Topilzin de Santiago Apóstol surprisingly receives in his home a researcher named Elena who wants to interview him/her. S/he had previously refused to speak to journalists and other people interested in her/his revolutionary feats; however, he does allow Elena to stay in his house for two days and he tells her part of his life story. After the visit, something inside Topilzin and his life partner Carmelita has

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been shaken up. In the ensuing days, Carmelita plays old melodies on the piano, and Topilzin dreams of the moments that he surely did not talk about: the story about how he met and fell in love with Carmelita and the vicissitudes they endured before they could finally join their lives together.

The story is told simply, and the dream happens "in the blink of an eye," during a nap, an ellipsis in which the main story develops framed by a secondary story.

The secondary story is that of the arrival of the researcher, whom Ansiedad Topilzin receives because she has "clean thoughts." By the way he tells the story of his dream, we later understand that the coronel has the gift of hearing people's thoughts. In the end, Elena's return to Topilzin's house is one of the reasons Carmelita awakens the coronel:

> "Ansiedad, Ansiedad, wake up, my love."
>
> "What? What's happening? Why are you waking me up, Carmelita? Can't you see I'm having a nap?"
>
> "Because you suffer a great deal when you dream, my love. And besides, Elena has come back with some men who have come to see you because they say the government is going to give you justice; they want to give you a medal."

Topilzin does not accept; she sends Elena word that she should stop her tomfoolery and invites her to lunch on Sunday.

The main story, contained in the dream, deals with the reflexive life dedicated to revolutionary strategies that Topilzin is submerged in. The calm this gives her is broken when General Azoro arrives with his "blond wife" at the port where the coronel and his army are camped. He can hear the thoughts of "Blondie," who is attracted by the "coronel's mad beauty," and he/she, in turn, is dazzled because "he had never seen a woman like that."

Enríquez not only creates an ambiguous main character in terms of its gender, but she also plays with sub-

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verting the roles of behavior expected according to gender and by changing the characteristics of the characters that Ansiedad and Carmelita are inspired by. Photographs and descriptions of the real Amelia Robles exist that describe her before her transformation as a white woman with light colored eyes and hair; she was even called "Blondie Amelia." Her partner, by contrast, Ángela Torres, is said to have been dark. Contrary to the real people, then, Ansiedad (the ambiguous non-gender specific name Enríquez gives to Amelio) is dark and even "Indian-like"; and Carmelita is blond. The result is a masculinized, cross-dressed woman with indigenous features and the middle name of Topilzin (the name given to the god Quetzalcóatl when in human form), who nevertheless does not fully cover the expectations about the behavior of macho men, especially in the times of the Revolution. Ansiedad Topilzin is brave, tough; he knows how to impose his will; he is a leader who teaches strategies of war to men and women; he has hands roughened by heavy work and the struggle, but is respectful of women and defends Carmelita from the general's violence. In the course of their falling in love, he does not take the initiative: Carmelita does. There is something in his personality that makes his behavior fit together although it was supposedly contrasting.

The way Victoria Enríquez develops the story's protagonist lets us know that no one is unaware that Ansiedad's biological sex is feminine. The narrator and the characters closest to her/him sometimes speak in feminine and other times in masculine terms, and many other times she avoids the distinction with neutral nouns or adjectives. Only in the memories of her childhood do her mother and her Nana Badass refer to her in the feminine, but those memories —a flashback within a flashback— are just those of the doubt about his gender behavior and sexuality.

> She closed her eyes and felt herself once again in the warm, dimly lit kitchen, seated in front of a mug of plum *atole* and heard again her mother's voice: "She's a strange little girl." She heard herself say "Why, mommy?" Her mother had looked at her, scared. "Why what?" "Why do you say I'm strange?" "I didn't say anything."
>
> . . . To cap it all off, besides always hearing what was none of her business, there was also that charm she cast over women without trying, and that very thing turned her into a dyke, butch, and that word that that woman had thought, that woman in feathers and with the fruit on her hat who showed her legs in the cantina: lesbeen.[5]
>
> Nana Badass had laughed out loud at her . . . when she went looking for her . . . to cure her. . . . "Don't worry; with time, you'll know how to live with yourself."

The general is aware of the love affair between Ansiedad and Carmelita. He accuses him of betrayal, but the Zapatista army he commands defends him: the coronel's behavior as a revolutionary strategist (and man) is irreproachable and the problem between Azoro and him/her is personal: "Just talk to her as God intended . . . she's not missing an arm, you know." With this phrase the author finally brings together the thing that makes the coronel's personality ambiguous: the figure denominated in the feminine is attributed with the quality of facing down, fighting bare-fisted, head to head with a man . . . a revolutionary general.

Azoro does not confront Topilzin; he assaults Carmelita until he practically kills her. Topilzin's special —even magical— skills allow him to find her before it's too late, and he calls upon the Dappled Cotton Nahual spirit (a jaguar) to summon Nana Badass, the sorceress of her childhood, who manages to save her.[6, 7]

Panthers and Pussycats[8]

Madrigal's stories are charged with a sense of humor, irony, and sometimes eroticism. In *Contarte en lésbico* (Telling You in Lesbian), the female sexuality shown is so broad that sexual-loving desire between women is something that any woman can access. Sexual-generic dissidents in these texts simply make use of their right to non-heteronormative eroticism without any huge conflicts, without justification or victimization.

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Among her characters, Madrigal also diversifies the behavior of masculinized women, like the way she presents the Purple Panther, a woman wrestler in the story "Two Out of Three Falls." Here, the narrator/protagonist tells us how she feels troubled by encountering what she thinks is a man with surprising biceps and a shiny head of hair, and only accepts an invitation to a wrestling match when she realizes it is a woman ("You see, I don't like guys."). The narrative develops as she watches the fight between the Woman Warrior of the South and the Panther —in Mexican wrestling terms, mask against hair— with her high-heeled blue shoes up on the seat in front of her, mirror in hand to retouch her lipstick.

Interspersed with the announcer's patter and the audience's screams is the description of the events showing how Panther, when they were alone, was the submissive partner, "passive in sex," who played the traditional feminine role: "Panther . . . Pussycat!" subject to the power of the narrator, whose name we don't know. Fallible power because the narrator displays a certain degree of annoyance when she mentions that the night before the match, there had been no sex:

> Panther. . . Yesterday she said that she didn't even want me to look at her. "It's not like you were a matador or something, that with a little fuck you were gonna lose your strength or your luck."

This makes us think that she's "won" each time, making the third encounter the one that will determine the domination:

> Panther, take care: I have your third and final fall perfectly planned.[9]

In this story, Madrigal once again exacerbates the stereotypes of feminine and masculine, situating them in two women to upset heteronormativity and concretely the linear relationship between masculine or feminine appearance and the expected behaviors. In the same way, she also situates her two protagonists in games of submission/domination, subverting the apparent relationships between these terms, making them correspond respectively with physical strength and the force of seduction —and probably of character, manifest in the narrator's attitude.

In her story, Victoria Enríquez de-centers gender behavior by exchanging the roles between Carmelita and Ansiedad, and what is feminine by creating an ambiguous character who combines in her/himself both behavior considered traditionally feminine and "how-masculinity-should-be." She upsets how-lesbians-should-be, which require androgynous characters, by constructing a cross-dressing masculine character, an imposition accepted and even highly valued by the rest of the characters.

There may be many lesbian short stories to analyze. But here I have only given a sample of two openly lesbian writers with two different perspectives that deal with aspects of Mexican popular culture and its possibilities for fictionalization and a critique of traditional socio-sexuality. VM

Notes

1 Fragment of my doctoral tesis *Narrativa sáfica latinoamericana: una lectura tortillera* (Sapphic Latin American Narrative, a Dyke Reading) (Mexico City: UAM-Iztapalapa, 2014).

2 Victoria Enríquez, *Con fugitivo paso. . .* (Mexico City: Lesvoz, 1997).

3 Elena Madrigal, *Contarte en lésbico* (Montreal: Éditions Alondra, 2010).

4 Some groups of feminists still do not accept transsexuals in their ranks.

5 The word is spelled like this in the story to show that Topilzin has very little knowledge of the topic.

6 In the story it says that the coronel sold herself to the Dappled Cotton Nahual; previously the author refers to Ansiedad's ability to turn herself into a swallow. It may be that she has turned herself into a jaguar and thus went herself for Nana Badass. These details bring the story, whose reference point is real, close to the magical, perhaps attempting to refer to what, at one point, Amelio Robles says when he tells the story of a fortune-teller who told him that he would go to war and win, but he would have very bad luck; or perhaps it's a way of bringing the story close to Mexico's magical, indigenous, mestizo culture.

7 Up to this point, all the quotes from the story "De un pestañazo" are from Victoria Enríquez, *Con fugitivo paso . . .* (Mexico City: Lezvoz, 1997), pp. 80, 71, 74-75, and 79.

8 All quotes from here on are from the story "A dos de tres caídas" (Two Out of Three Falls), published in Elena Madrigal, *Contarte en lésbico* (Montreal: Éditions Alondras, 2010), pp. 110, 112, and 114.

9 This may be a small mistake by the author: it would be the third match but only the second fall, just as the title of the story indicates.