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Show and Tell The Difference: Women Narrators in Contemporary Puerto Rico

by Dr. Maria Sola
University of Puerto Rico, Mayaquez

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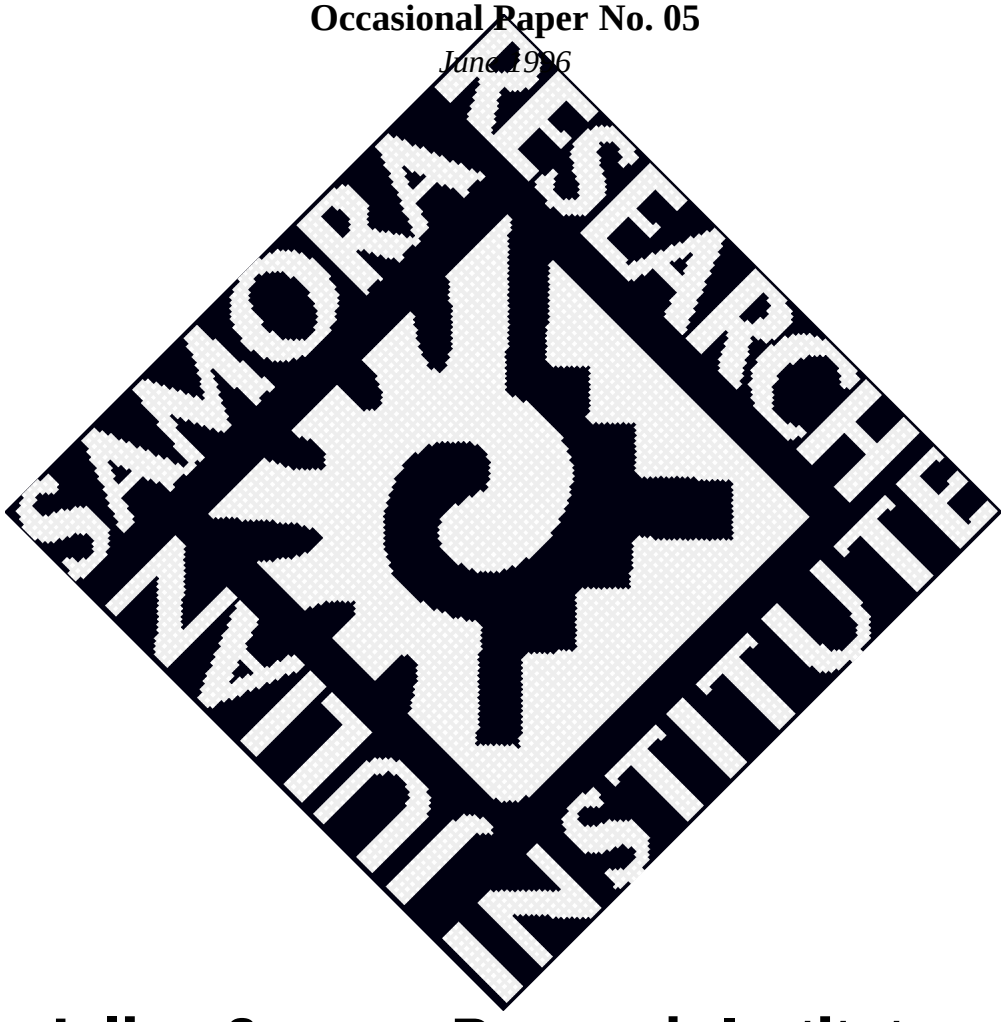

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Show and Tell The Difference:
Women Narrators in Contemporary Puerto Rico

As I stand here tonight, it's no small wonder to me that some people, maybe a lot of people, in a famous university thousands of miles from the small Caribbean island of Puerto Rico, are interested in learning about literature there. But this is, of course, almost the twenty-first century. The map of learning is much more complex and includes many more people and cultures. Actually, I don't think the texts I will speak about, or their characters, questions and ideas will sound foreign to academics or to students in the U.S. I feel very honored by your invitation and have tried to put together a stimulating, clear (and brief, fear not) picture of our culture, our women and most of all our excellent narrative artists, many of whom, by the way, are men, although I shall mention only a few of them. One of the reasons I can speak today on women writers in Puerto Rico is that one hundred sixty some years ago, in 1832, a woman felt good enough about her writing to send one of her poems, in honor of an official event, to the local press, thus becoming the first native-born Puerto Rican woman ***or man*** to receive an official accolade. Her name was María Bibiana Benítez and, by our standards, her works are stilted and stuffy, but memorable nevertheless, because she opened the way for all Puerto Ricans.

Puerto Ricans are, and have been for centuries, a people of the borderlands, or should we say the borderseas, right in the middle of the crossing paths of all ships. First there were the slender swift vessels of the Caribbean basin aboriginal peoples, a thousand and more years ago, for they were a seafaring, brave people if there ever were any. To this day ships of all flags, airships and U.S. warplanes and vehicles criss-cross our air, our seas and our land. This, of course, means Puerto Rico has received many visitors, mainly uninvited, from the conquistadors to the slave traders and buccaneers, to the immigrants from Europe and, of course, to the American leaders of modern expansionism. And so we are a standing paradox, isolated and in the center of history, few in number but wide-flung, ranging from the most provincial and disadvantaged to the most worldly, sophisticated and spunky individuals.

Because Puerto Ricans are a Latin American people, women in Puerto Rico are formed to fit male-dominated Spanish sex roles, which are actually almost Islamic in stricture. Nevertheless, women have also faced the wrenching changes which came with an economy geared to the modern state for several generations now. Puerto Rico was invaded by U.S. troops in 1898 and became a U.S. unincorporated territory, which it is to this day. The U.S. government and military establishment obtained control of public affairs and started institutions such as universal free schooling for children and public health programs, undoubtedly advantageous and unheard of during the Spanish regime. Puerto Rico was plunged into change, sometimes haphazard and certainly not always positive, but enough to alter all lives significantly. Women's outlook was particularly affected because authorities put in effect the pattern of educating them to work in the lower echelons of the public instruction and health services. Though this was fairly normal for industrial economies at the beginning of the twentieth century, it constituted a turning point for collective interaction in Puerto Rico's economic system which, up to then, had been colonial, agricultural and eminently conservative.

For all these reasons (which simplify to the limit for the sake of brevity), many believe the emergence of Puerto Rican women into public spheres can be totally attributed to U.S. influence. This, however, is not exactly true; in terms of culture and specifically literature, Puerto Rican women of the nineteenth century were uncharacteristically active, judged in terms of a Spanish colony. As I said before, the first personal actually born and bred in Puerto Rico to attain a literary prize, a modest but rare accomplishment, was María Bibiana Benítez (1783-1873). Bibiana was a refined Mayagüez spinster who set an example for others and probably inspired her niece, Alejandrina Benítez (1819-1879) to try her hand at publishing literature. An apt pupil, Alejandrina in turn managed to get one of her stories included in the island's first printed collection of literary works by local writers, the **Aguinaldo Puertorriqueño**, published in San Juan in 1843. Alejandrina also became, years later, mother, teacher and role model to the best loved poet of that century, José Gautier Benítez (1851-1880).

The Benítez writers, a literary clan founded by a woman, anticipate a definite trend in Puerto Rican literature: not only did several women, at almost any point since the inception of European style literature, write and publish poems, stories and even plays and novels, but several male writers have addressed the "woman question" with definite feminist leanings. And they are no ordinary writers either, but none less than Alejandro Tapia Rivera (1826-1882), designated by scholars as "founder" and first committed artist of Puerto Rican literature, and María de Hostos (1839-1903), perhaps even now our most renowned thinker and writer. This goes to show that women made a place for themselves in all spheres of Puerto Rican culture, particularly in literature, from very early on. Thus it is no mere lucky streak that at present, and since the seventies, women are right up there with the best of them when writers are enumerated, taking up almost half of the coveted spaces in terms of books published and sold, on the one hand, and in earning kudos and international attention. All this, of course, is relatively speaking, because Puerto Rico is actually not a good market for books, even in Spanish.

Before going on to contemporary women's fiction, I do not want to give the impression that other women writers through the years were not remarkable. I would certainly like to say more, if time permitted, about interesting women such as, for example, the poet Lola Rodríguez de Tio, who wrote the lyrics to our national anthem, among many other poems. Lola is noted for having cut her hair and dressed in manly costume to be able to attend political revolutionary meetings, bringing repression and exile upon herself; in spite of which her works remain an important part of literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Or about Luisa Capetillo, an anarchist labor leader and champion of free love, remembered more for being the first woman to wear pants in public than for her essays and fiction. Capetillo's writings were published in the twenties, but until recently were never mentioned in literary history. And some of you have probably read about Julia de Burgos (1914-1953) now revered as our national poet, who as a young teacher published two important poetry books, but because of economic hardship and political repression died an early death in New York without having fulfilled her potential.

It is fundamental to mention the fact that, from 1934 on, many of the foremost Puerto Rican scholars and critics in the humanities have been women, and most of them strove to bring attention to the place of women in our culture. Important literary reviews and even publishing houses have been started courageously and, with great difficulty, kept alive for decades by women such as Nilita Vientós, a fine essayist; and cultural leader Carmen Rivera Izcoa, the driving force of Puerto Rico's Editorial Huracán, among others equally worthy of mention and gratitude. I make a point of bringing in these accomplishments because, while it is obvious that literature has to do with the talent, discipline and education of the individual writer, little thought is usually given to the literary system by means of which writings are made available to readers and granted a space in the culture. I consider this aspect crucial to the visibility of Puerto Rican women writers: they would not have succeeded if many other women, and, yes, some fair-minded men in Puerto Rico had not been aiding and abetting their efforts, as critics, scholars, teachers and journalists through the years. What I cannot answer is why.

Why did women become active in a male-dominated circle, such as recognized literature has always been? Why did Puerto Rican women of diverse sectors stake their claim in cultural "public life" even before the influx of American institutions? Why have they insisted more than men on getting an education? I have speculated on the possible influence of African or Taíno cultures, or on the specific and sometimes atypical social and political processes throughout the five centuries Puerto Rico has been in contact with the European sphere. But the research this entails is truly daunting. I do think there is ground for exploration because Puerto Rican women are not your normal passive sector. Nor are they, let me not mislead you, free from oppression, violence, harassment, double standards, double shifts as salaried workers and unassisted homemakers, or from making less money for doing the same work as men. Many or most Puerto Rican women are also, to a certain degree, in collusion with the perpetuation of these sexist practices which harm them and all of society more than most are willing to admit. Which brings me back to contemporary literature because, in spite of being staunch feminists and very patriotic (each in their own way), contemporary women narrators do not let either Puerto Ricans or women off the hook or portray either of them as mere victims, villains or heroines.

I find in many of the texts I've come to speak about life-affirming richness, an openness and understanding, passion and compassion that belies the sectarian, that seems to preclude the myopic smallness associated in some instances with nationalism or feminism. They are more than women's literature, more than Caribbean literature, although that is what they most definitely are. What then, are these texts' peculiarities, the unique features that exemplify human diversity, the difference that makes for exciting reading? Can readers, conversely, find in these Puerto Rican stories women have constructed, some sort of sameness to make it possible for them to understand? Do these narrations offer the ultimate gift of art as entertainment, the sheer intensity of having our imagination coaxed or driven into collaboration for enjoyment and learning? Can analyzing, classifying, comparing, deconstructing or telling about them give you the answer? Believe you me, there is no substitute for immersion in the warm, sensual dream-colored waves of literary discourse, sometimes playful, sometimes turbulent, that these tales and novels are made of. On the other hand, most people would rather have an introduction to unfamiliar territory. As this seems to be the case with American readers with most of Puerto Rican (and indeed even Latin American) literature as a whole, I gladly agreed to start my present audience on that rewarding road.

I've chosen three short stories to give just a taste of what you might find if you enter into these texts as interactive readers. All three have been translated into English and several other languages, although I did not have the translations on hand and was forced to do my own. Any and all of the finely crafted works of many Puerto Rican women writers could do: I have simply picked some of my favorites. One of my examples is a short story by Rosario Ferré, who has been internationally recognized since the seventies as one of the Caribbean's foremost representatives of magic realism, that most appreciated of Latin American art's qualities. Rosario Ferré is certainly an expert on doing magic with words, but she has worked on many other subjects in twelve or more books of essays, poetry and fiction. She recently announced, but has not published, a new novel written in English, **The House on the Lagoon**.

This will be sure to add fire to the ongoing language debate among Puerto Ricans, so allow me to digress a bit before going on to speak about what matters most, the texts themselves. Rosario Ferré in alternating Spanish and English in different books, is being innovative among Puerto Rican literary writers. Yes, there are Puerto Ricans who write in English; most of them live in the U.S. and they opt for English because it seems more appropriate for their personal artistic expression, but must do not go back and forth in different works. Code switching, however, which is common in the oral communication of Puerto Ricans in the U.S., is often used in constructing the discourse of fictional characters and even in poetry and essays.

Pedro Pietri, poet/playwright Miguel Piñero and Piri Thomas were, among others, pioneers in this venture, as were Nicholasa Mohr and Sandra María Esteves. Esmerelda Santiago's memoir **When I Was Puerto Rican**, published last month in Spanish translation, was very well received by critics and readers in its original English. Other women who have written their Puerto Rican-inspired narrations in English are Judith Ortiz Cofer, Aurora Levins, Rosario Morales and Giannina Braschi. Rigid exclusion of English-language texts from Puerto Rican literary history, once common, is no longer the norm, as many increasingly recognize that living in the U.S., for short or longer periods, is undeniably a part of Puerto Rican experience and shapes our view of life and culture. One recent volume by Juan Flores, a series of essays on precisely this subject, refers to Puerto Rico's "divided borders", and just months ago a volume of scholarly articles on the Puerto Rican experience in the U.S. was given the title **The Commuter Nation**; both books were, not surprisingly, published only in English. For most Puerto Ricans, however, there is no choice at all; we feel Spanish is irreplaceable in our art and do not resort to English even after having mastered it as a means of literary production, which is, in any case, not true of many.

It does seem to be true for Rosario Ferré and I, for one, wish her the best with English-speaking readers, for a better ambassador of our art and culture we could not hope for. Ferré was born in Ponce in the forties, and reared amongst or perhaps between her mother's and father's people. They are clans both similar and distinct; although both are rich and culti-

vated, they represented contradictions between modern entrepreneurs and old landed money. These social nuances are pertinent; it is a pity that I cannot linger and tell you about the southern city of Ponce and how it rivals and sometimes outshines San Juan in several important aspects. **The Youngest Doll**, "La muñeca menor", was one of Ferré's first stories, written more than twenty years ago, and still one of her best. Only six pages longs, it includes several decades of Puerto Rican history; one woman's life and it' s continuation through her niece and through the doll the aunt made with her own hands.

These characters have no given names, but are called "the old-maid aunt", the girls, the eldest, the youngest, the physician and so on. It is a tale of genteel poverty, for it takes place when the cane-sugar aristocracy slowly came to the end of its fortune and prestige. The old aunt sits on her rocking chair on the balcony of the once proud hacienda and remembers her splendid youth as a beautiful high-strung heiress. Her spirit and hopes had been shattered before she was even twenty when, swimming in the nearby river, she was bitten by a prawn, a "chágara", on the lower leg. The bite swelled and festered interminably, making her drag her grotesquely enlarged leg, in spite of twenty years of treatment and expensive visits from the family physician. Giving up on marriage and pretensions, she becomes caretaker of her sister's nine daughters, who live in their grandparent's house.

The loving aunt develops into a brooding and demanding old woman as the nieces grow up to marry and leave the house. A ritual evolves and takes over her life and almost the household, for she makes one doll every year for each girl. The room where they were displayed in time came to house more than one hundred and fifty dolls, each of them the size of one of the girls on one of her birthdays. When each niece leaves as a bride, she is given the last doll to keep for life. The youngest marries the doctor's son, also a doctor, who is as fascinated as his father by the charm and style of the once powerful aristocrats. The elder physician unabashedly admits he could have cured the aunt's ailment easily, but did not because the fees he charged have paid for his son's medical education.

The son, no less mercenary than his father, courts the youngest niece only for the thrill of marrying an old name and puts her practically on display for all to see on the balcony of his town house. The youngest niece had been given the most exquisite of all the dolls, filled with purified honey and given the aunt's last diamonds to glisten in her porcelain face as eyes. Soon after the wedding the husband, cold and uncaring as ever, cuts out the dolls'eyes to sell. When the life size doll later disappears, the wife claims the ants have taken her away. He hardly notices that his wife remains as young as ever, though lifeless and withdrawn. Intrigued at long last by her seemingly invincible beauty, he finally goes into her room while she sleeps to observe her closely. I quote this short story's final sentences: "He placed the stethoscope very softly over her heart and only heard the far away rumors of running waters. Then the doll lifted her lids, and out of the empty sockets of her eyes, came the furious antennae of hundreds of chágaras."

A horror story, a political allegory, a tale of class and value conflicts in Caribbean history, **The Youngest Doll** is also an excellent sample of what is called women's writing because it decodes its meanings from a woman's perspective, showing the female characters' actions and reactions. The old aunt's silent passage from a vibrant human being to a semi-crazed crippled hag is not described but shown. The reader watches her gradually withdraw from the daily routine of caring for the children, combing their hair and telling them stories. More and more she is absorbed by the ominous task of cutting open the higüeras, placing them like so many little coffins on the balcony, until the flesh's fruit dries and is torn out and used to fill the dolls. Sewing the clothes, selecting the buttons or jewels to be used as eyes may be ordinary enough, but the ritual of submerging the so-called eyes in the river for a few days, so that they can learn to recognize the chágaras, is clearly a sign of derangement.

As time goes by, the aunt spends more and more time cradling the numerous dolls and talking to them about the past when they were small, or sitting on the balcony, planning other dolls. She has helped in the task of breaking her nieces' spirits and turning them into prospective brides, because there was no alternative in that provincial society, as she herself found. Even so, she pours hate into the beings she forms obsessively, the handsome dolls. The marriage doll she makes for each niece is obviously a caricature of a traditional upper-class wife's empty life, with her waxen or porcelain features, made to the young woman's likeness but frozen in a vacuous smile, perpetually dressed in clothes made to be watched in, not

to move. The old aunt has become a monster as her nieces have turned into dolls, and the chágara she was made to carry in her leg has reproduced and come back to seek revenge.

This non-realistic but oh-so-truthful story can be read as a metaphor for the class conflict between the landed gentry and commercial businessmen, no less than for the oppression of women. It is also a grim reminder of the destructive force of impotence and despair, which can turn any human being into a vengeful monster. There is poetry and mystery in every word; details are wondrously evoked by the rhythm and sound of old-fashioned names of things that made up these women's lives. The text is ambivalent because it lovingly builds a world long gone, only to condemn it for its unfairness. Rosario Ferré's work can be angry as well as ironic, and she can also combine the gentle discourse of women's past with the banter and obscene intensity of other social sectors and other searing dramas.

The second story is about the search for empowerment, and takes place years later, around 1950. Women are also this text's main focus. **A Week of Seven Days** was published by Magali Garcia Ramis in 1976, the same year as Rosario Ferré's first book. A first-person narrative, the voice belongs to a child, eight or nine years old, who speaks of her mother Luisa, who has brought her to stay in her paternal grandmother's house, telling her she will come back in a week. The little girl remembers life with her mother as she waits; she has lived alone with her mother and has been her companion while they lead an unconventional life, moving from place to place. The girl is in some ways mature beyond her age, while keeping the candor of a child. Soon the reader gathers that Luisa is a political activist, possibly a Puerto Rican Nationalist who participates in the 1950 uprising. The setting, however, could be any Latin American country, since the references are not precise. Most important is the tenderness and respect mother and daughter share. The child bravely tries to do her part, accepting in her own intuitive manner that her mother had powerful reasons to leave her. Trusting her mother's promise, she wonders why much more than seven days have gone by and her mother still hasn't returned.

A subtle yet moving story, "Una semana de siete dias" encloses in just five pages a world of implied meanings and human conflict. Indeed, every revolutionary grapples with the conflict of having to put his or her loved ones aside to attend to a higher duty. Luisa has left not only her husband, but every man who ever loved her; as her daughter remembers, "my mother was a woman with large lovely eyes and men always used to cry because of her." No one understands Luisa's sense of mission, least of all her mother-in-law, who has become her only recourse since the child's father died. The girl, whose name is never mentioned, will be separated from her mother for a long time, perhaps forever, and we grieve with her the loss of such an exceptional mother and friend. Some readers may also mirror society's attitude, blaming Luisa as a heartless fanatic who forsakes her most sacred duty — but the text makes us feel how painfully she parts with her greatest love, her daughter. She has been forever tormented by the prospect of having to leave at a moments notice, without knowing how the child will fare. But she goes anyway, convinced she must do it for this child and many others, for her people matter more to her than her grief or even her daughter's individual future. How difficult it is to be a woman and still want to live inside history, transforming reality and not just being its object.

Magali García Ramis'story gives another side of women's lives, the struggle, and shows how some women forge their own experiences, far removed from traditional roles in spite of oppression. Nor is it only defiance or freedom that gives meaning to their decisions, but solidarity. This particular text, as often happens with women's writing, contributes positive role models as well as denouncing injustice. It also captures in its spare, straightforward monologue the inner process of a child's perception. The psychological bent is García Ramis' forte; she works well constructing her character's inner discourse and seldom uses the separate narrator's voice.

In this sense she is a novelistic narrator, not given to lyrical passages which express the text's attitude, as is the case with Ferré's **The Youngest Doll**. García Ramis rarely tells stories where the narrator talks openly to the reader, often in jest — a technique which characterizes Ana Lydia Vega's storytelling. Ana Lydia Vega's short story is the third and last I chose as a specific example. It has a long title, very playful, witty and rhythmic: "Letra para salsa y tres

soneos por encargo," which I can only loosely and awkwardly translate as **Lyrics for Salsa and Three Improvised Choruses**. And so begin the difficulties with this most irreverent writer's texts. Ana Lydia is one of Puerto Rico's best humorists ever, a consummate storyteller, which makes it hard indeed to describe the zesty, mouth-watering flavor of her Caribbean Spanish and even harder to replicate it in English. Her first book for the English speaking public was translated by linguist Andrew Hurley, who knows Puerto Rican Spanish in all its registers, street, literary and otherwise. That is the good news; the bad news is the book was first sold last Saturday and reviewed in the November 13 Literary Supplement and I have not yet seen it. So please bear with my somewhat hasty translation, although the truly hilarious postmodern feminist morality tale I speak of deserves better.

Let's see if I can nutshell this strange combination, which actually works. The characters have no names and are called as is usual in street parlance: the guy, the dude, El Tipo and The Babe, the Broad, La Tipa. The all-knowing, ironic narrator's voice is in total control and talks to the reader throughout the happenings, sharing the fun she makes of all involved. The setting is one the most typical of Río Piedras, a busy street with department stores blaring commercials and music, full of pedestrians and cars. A twenty-something well-built but not-so-great-looking dental hygienist normally walks by on her lunch hour and is hounded by one of those omnipresent sidewalk Don Juanes and his nonstop jabber, called "piropos" or "flores" in Puerto Rico, all too flattering names for such chauvinist-pig discourse. It so happens she had been saving her virginity for an upper-class fiancé who jilted her at the last minute to marry within his own sector. La Tipa is now plain bored with her routine and only feels burdened by what she formerly viewed as a sacred prize.

So, one day at noon, she decides she's going to call El Tipo's bluff, get rid of her virginity anonymously and, without all the fuss, have herself some fun in the bargain.. El Tipo gets the surprise of his life and goes willingly enough to the motel-room with her but once there cannot rise to the occasion. Enter the soneos, the improvised choruses, three open-ended comic possible endings for this embarrassing farce. La Tipa is forced to act bold and sexy in order to excite the suddenly shy retiring big-mouth or go back the same way she came. The reader gets to pick which scenario would ensue, given these not quite improbable circumstances. The dangers of hypocrisy and erotic role-playing by both men and women are certainly exposed, and most male readers tend to dislike this story, because they balk at ridicule aimed at their sexual performance. But the woman, as usual, gets the worse deal.

El Tipo, undaunted, goes back to his street corner harassment, plus, his buddies will never hear the end of his grossly exaggerated and conveniently edited adventure. La Tipa returns to her low-end job, sadder but wiser. Unlike El Tipo, who has obviously nothing to do, think about or hope for, she still has to map out the rest of her life, which won't be easy if she persists in thinking of sexuality as so much marketable goods. Perhaps the text is saying that women had better start thinking for themselves instead of buying into the system's wife or floozy dichotomy. Or maybe it shows one of the bad jokes sexist culture so often plays on both women and men. This is what Vega's stories are best at; in her literary universe, everybody and everything is a laughing matter. In Vega's narratives and essays nothing — be it spiritualism, Nationalism, VIP's, or the Blessed Virgin — is beyond parody. But the mockery comes from a kindred spirit, and not in a cynical or pedantic manner; so that her texts laugh with us and with their characters, as well as at the characters, at the readers and even at literature's lofty image. Here, as always, language is the key. For Vega elaborates a unique blend of discourses, from the intellectual to the vulgar and obscene, without omitting the bete noire of Puerto Rican writers, the anglicismos or English words blended into Spanish. A teacher of French who admits to reading mostly in English and French, Vega abhors purism and academies, and is all for lexical innovation and informality even on the most important topics.

So what are we to make of these three stories? They have in common neither setting, time scheme, tone or style. Written by three Puerto Rican women whose ages are less than ten years apart, the texts show and tell the wide range and versatility this group of writers cultivates. They adapted the literary code to their own objectives, voicing meanings or messages that are not only womanly and feminist, but also representative of Puerto Rican identity and patriotic aspirations. But above all they aimed and succeeded at what matters most, which is simply good literature, judged by any standards.

Maria Sola, November, 1994