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## Unchained Tales: Women Prose Writers from the Hispanic Caribbean in the 1990s

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In 1991, looking back on the literary production of Caribbean women in the preceding two decades as I drafted the introduction to *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam: Short Stories by Caribbean Women*, I was struck above all by the 'veritable explosion' in women's writing that had marked the 1970s and 1980s, a development that Carmen Esteves and I had sought to showcase in that collection. It had been our aim, above all, to chronicle how women's voices had moved into the mainstream of literary activity in the region after decades of silence and neglect. In selecting the stories that would form part of that anthology, we had been most concerned with how women writers sought to articulate their gendered position in Caribbean societies through narratives that told of their search for 'agency' in their personal and social lives.

A decade has elapsed since *Green Cane and Juicy Flotsam* was published, and during the intervening period women's writing in the Hispanic Caribbean has undergone a transformation. In this essay, therefore, I am seeking to trace recent trends in prose writings by Hispanic Caribbean women, looking at new thematic and stylistic directions as writers move away from the almost strictly gender-focused (feminist or proto-feminist) approaches that characterized the 1980s and begin to break new ground in fields that were traditionally considered the province of male writers. After a brief survey of literary production by women in the Hispanic Caribbean from roughly 1988 to 2001, this article looks at the four principal areas into which women's writings have moved: religion (particularly African-derived religious systems), the erotic, popular culture, and the environment. In this survey, two very different writers – Zoé Valdés and Mayra Montero – emerge as dominant figures, in part because of their impressive productivity and international fame, but particularly because they set new parameters for women's fiction in the region, anchoring two distinct possibilities of being Caribbean writers for a new century.

### Cuba

The voices of Cuban women writers have been rather muted in the last decade, as the country has faced the challenges of the 'período especial' after the collapse of

the Soviet Union. However, the resulting reorganization of the island's economy – with its tentative forays into capitalistic enterprise – and the *balseo* flight from the island in the face of diminishing resources and severe reductions in public services have found their way into fiction by Cuban women. With the exception of two novelists who left the island in pursuit of greater economic and literary opportunities abroad during this period – Daína Chaviano and Zoé Valdés – the most successful Cuban women writers of the 1990s produced short stories. Promising voices from the earlier part of the decade – such as Verónica López Kónina, author of the haunting 'Silvia', and Soledad Cruz, whose 'Declaración pública de amor' had placed her among the pioneers in Latin American post-modern erotic fiction – have faded into obscurity; yet others have emerged with very powerful work, thanks in great part to the mentoring efforts of more experienced writers, chief among them Mirta Yáñez.

It is in Yáñez's anthology *Estatuas de sal: cuentistas cubanas contemporáneas* (1996) that this new generation of writers comes together for the first time, displaying its versatility and freshness in unique ways. 'The most outstanding characteristic of the Cuban women writers of today', in Yáñez's words, 'is our *special realism*: a realism that the Cuban story writers have shaped by broadening the spectrum of the everyday, adding the absurd, the magical, the supernatural, humor, fantasy, and nonsense to daily life, with the political scene, society, and ideas as a backdrop.' In her assessment – and no one knows more intimately than Yáñez the trajectory of Cuban women's literary work in this decade – these writers have sought a synthesis 'between the register of intimate memories and that of historical testimony, between objectivity and subjectivity, adding a certain melodramatic touch *a lo cubano* as well' (Yáñez, 1996: 19).

From among this generation of new Cuban writers, two stand apart as most innovative and productive: Nancy Alonso and Marilyn Bobes. Alonso, a professor of physiology in Havana, was born in Havana in 1949. Her first collection of stories, *Tirar la primera piedra*, appeared in 1997, and her stories have been included in all anthologies of Cuban stories of note in the 1990s. Her strength as a short story writer rests on a talent for creating deeply-etched characters out of seemingly straightforward first-person narratives. These characters' individuality flows out of meticulous reconstructions of the specific linguistic registers appropriate to their gender, education and situation. Alonso is particularly skilled at peppering these narratives lightly with the details that give verisimilitude and authenticity to the voices. In 'Diente por diente', for example, she deftly reconstructs the tensions between Cubans from the first exodus following the Revolution and the living conditions and outlook of those who remained behind. This story, like most of those included in *Tirar la primera piedra*, is built around a central irony that is unveiled slowly before the reader's eyes. Pepe, the narrator of 'Diente por diente', a college professor in Cuba whose income is barely sufficient to feed him for the first twenty days of the month, receives a carton of eggs from a former colleague he had joined in pelting with eggs after he had announced his departure for the United States fifteen years before. The tensions between how the persistent scarcity of goods, food and

money haunts the people of Cuba and the ease with which something as banal as a carton of eggs can become a weapon for vengeance in such a context are beautifully showcased in this story, as they are in almost every text Alonso has written throughout the decade. Alonso has also made her mark thematically by addressing with honesty and deftness the realities of Cuba's Vietnam – the massive losses of Cuban lives in Mozambique and Angola.

If Alonso establishes the realism of her tales through her accurate ear for single voices encapsulating realities through a singularity of perspective, Marilyn Bobes, a professional journalist, aims instead for a realism of context. The winner of the 1995 Casa de las Américas Prize for her first book of tales, *Alguien tiene que llorar*, Bobes deploys multiple voices in her tales to create a cocoon of voices that weaves a particular context around her central characters, giving them definition and depth. In the story that anchors her first collection, 'Alguien tiene que llorar', interwoven narratives heard at a wake recall the dead Maritza, a lesbian who committed suicide by drowning. These contextual characters – a frustrated housewife consumed by jealousy, the friend who would have wanted to become her lover, the former classmate who could never match Maritza's independence of spirit, and others – build a framework of intolerance and resentment that by implication seems responsible for Maritza's suicide.

In other tales from *Alguien tiene que llorar*, like 'Pregúntaselo a Dios' and 'En Florencia, siete años después', Bobes assumes a more playful, parodic tone, inserting in her heroine's voice – that of a young Cuban woman who marries an upper middle-class Frenchman and leaves the island with him but remains haunted by her former boyfriend – an element of quirkiness that comes from her frustrated sensuality and her longing for a man who has become symbolic of everything she left behind. The elements of popular culture she weaves into the stories – the popular *bolero* 'Pregúntaselo a Dios' and the over-exposed image of Michaelangelo's *David* in 'En Florencia ...' – help her create a sardonic context that establishes the required critical distance between audience and character, and between the character as we perceive her and her own view of herself and her plight. Bobes exploits the amusement potential of the cultural and linguistic differences that separate her characters – the contrast between the slightly pedantic narrator of 'Pregúntaselo a Dios' and its vibrant, motor-mouth protagonist, for example – to build layers of meaning that give depth to her seemingly light-hearted tales.

Bobes, an avowed feminist, knows the importance of literature for opening venues for the discussion of topics that have long been taboo in Cuba, such as homosexuality (particularly female homosexuality) and violence against women. Her efforts on this behalf have been part of what she sees as a thematic and conceptual opening for which women writers have prepared the ground. Bobes is now working on a novel, as yet untitled, in which she explores Cuban history since the Revolution from an autobiographical perspective.

If Alonso and Bobes have perfected that 'special realism' that Mirta Yáñez describes as one of the chief features of Cuban writing by women in the 1990s, Daína Chaviano, who has been living in Miami since the middle of the decade,

has moved in a surprising direction – that of science fiction. A rare example of a Latin American author working in this genre, Chaviano published her first science fiction tale, *Fábulas de una abuela extraterrestre*, in 1988. The novel weaves three interrelated narratives set in the Middle Ages, the present, and the future, whose characters – Medieval warriors, contemporary youths, and futuristic fanciful winged creatures – strive to resolve social and moral conflicts. In 1990 Chaviano published a collection of science fiction tales, *El abrevadero de los dinosaurios*, in which she imagines a world where humans and dinosaurs must learn to co-exist despite clashing values and beliefs. In these tales Chaviano draws upon a multiplicity of approaches – humor, poetry, the erotic and the surreal – to examine human cultures against the mirror of an alien, yet compelling, dinosaur universe. Chaviano has also dabbled in children's literature, having published *País de dragones* in 2001. *País de dragones*, with illustrations by Rapi Diego, looks at characters who despite the harshness of the material world can still call upon the purity of heart needed to see, touch and hear the supernatural.

After leaving Cuba for the United States, Chaviano completed a recently-published trilogy of science fiction tales, *La Habana oculta* (The Occult Side of Havana). *Gata encerrada* (1998), the first novel in the series, explores the process through which a young woman, Melissa, becomes a writer. It is an exploration of how the power of the imagination can transform a faceless, shadowy character into an obsessive force as it struggles to become a living entity. Suspecting that some hallucinating event from the remote past is responsible for the dreams and visions that give life to Melissa's would-be character, she begins to explore this invisible being and her mesmerizing world, removing layer after layer of narrative to reveal a web of myth and legend, magical empires and obscure forces bursting to enter the page. The novel owes as much to a long tradition of fantastic literature and science fiction as it does to the undercurrents of Caribbean versions of *espiritismo* still viable in Cuba despite four decades of socialism and to the Celtic belief in reincarnation, which has reached Chaviano through tales about her Celtic ancestors.

The main influences on Chaviano's writing, however, have been literary. She has read English and American literature extensively and names Edgar Allan Poe, Lovecraft, Blake, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Tennyson and Yeats as major influences on her work. She is a great admirer of Margaret Atwood, the Canadian writer with whom she shares an interest in fantasy and science fiction, and of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which boasts two of her favorite literary characters: Gandalf the Wizard and Galadriel, the queen of the elves. These influences are alive in her novels, as is the presence of the world of C. S. Lewis, whose work, especially the *Chronicles of Narnia*, portions of which she has learned by heart, features in numerous allusions. The greatest influence on her work, however, has been that of Ray Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*.

In *Casa de Juegos* (1998), the second installment of *The Occult Side of Havana*, Chaviano draws on her strong familiarity with fantastic and Surrealist literature, film and art, to conjure up a fable about a young woman's penetration

into her own heart of darkness. Prompted by her lover, Gaia sallies forth to meet a mysterious woman who leads her to a mansion where everything is in continuous movement and change. Feeling that she must embrace this frightening environment as a path to self-knowledge, she returns again and again to this world of bewildering rituals where gods appear in human form and humans assume temporarily the guise of deities. The fantastic, supernatural element in this book is provided by the *orichas*, the spirits of the Afro-Cuban practice of Santería. With its underlying foundation of fantasy and imagery drawn from virtual reality scenarios, the House of Games functions as a post-modernist version of the archetypal narrative of the search for the self.

The third part of *La Habana oculta*, *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre* (1999), won Chaviano the Azorín Award for best novel in Spain. In this novel, Chaviano returns to *espiritismo* and the role of the *medium* as conduits to gain access to the world of fantasy and the spirits. This novel, however, is the most rooted in everyday reality and Cuban history of all of Chaviano's work, and its characters, despite their flights into other centuries, are still sufficiently anchored in Cuba's 'período especial.' Claudia, its protagonist, university-educated and talented, still must become a *jinetera*, prostituting herself to make a living. Her character's experiences as a *jinetera* allow Chaviano to introduce into the text an erotic element that has become characteristic of her work since her early poetry.

In *El hombre, la hembra, y el hambre*, Claudia's frequent paranormal experiences allow her to flee into eighteenth-century Havana, another city nearing collapse, an escape that allows her to pose, in a different time frame, the question of leaving the island, one too painful to confront in the present. Disgusted with sleeping with men she does not like, yet unwilling to relinquish the dollars that give her access to special consumer stores, she wonders whether it is any longer possible to work decently and have enough to eat in Cuba. As Claudia moves across time, from the police raids and the black market exchanges of present-day Havana to the fear of English invasion and smuggling of eighteenth-century Havana the question becomes one and the same: to stay or not to stay. The question is posed in Shakespearean terms – Chaviano confesses to an obsession with Shakespeare's work. Claudia's monologue in the chapter titled 'La sombra del príncipe danés' is modelled on Hamlet's famous 'To be or not to be' speech, which Claudia parodies in Chaviano's tribute to a text she loves. This, a crucial moment in the text, takes place during the violent events of 1994 that produced a massive flight of *balseros* venturing into the sea in the hope of reaching Florida. Faced by her two lovers bearing their rafts and inviting her to leave with them, for Claudia the ghost of Hamlet joins that of an old African slave, an Amerindian and José Martí standing against the ancient walls as the bells of Old Havana toll for her.

The question of remaining in Cuba is one posed frequently by the characters in Zoé Valdés's work. Valdés, born in Havana in 1959, was the most prolific of Caribbean women writers throughout the 1990s. She lived in Cuba until 1994, working as a film scriptwriter and assistant director of the *Revista de Cine Cubano*. The author of seven novels published between 1993 and 2000 and

translated into a number of languages, she now lives in Paris, which she first visited as a member of the staff of the Cultural Office of the Cuban Embassy.

Valdés began her writing career as a poet, and her first collection, *Respuestas para vivir* (1986) won the Roque Daltón prize. Her second poetry collection, *Todo para una sombra*, was published in Barcelona in 1986, and her third, *Vagón para fumadores*, appeared in 1996. Her most recent volume of poems, *Cuerdas para el lince*, appeared in 1999. Her international fame, however, is based on her work as a novelist. Valdés's first novel, *Sangre azul*, was published in Cuba in 1993. Its protagonist, Attys, a beautiful adolescent girl, moves from Cuba to Paris in pursuit of Gnosis, a painter who had offered his love only to withdraw it later, initiating her in the search for an impossibility, that of an absolute blue which can only be gleaned from the most intimate connection to the senses but is invisible on the surface. In this search for the perfect colour and a perfect love, Attys generates memories like symbols that overcome her own reality. The novel, a finalist for the Sonrisa Vertical prize for erotic fiction, already gave evidence of Valdés's daring imagery and the vitality of her expression of the erotic.

Valdés first came to notice as a writer in 1995 with the publication of *La nada cotidiana*, a bestseller translated immediately into a dozen languages. 'She was born on an island that sought to build paradise' – the opening and closing line of the novel – frames the story of Patria, born in 1959 with the Revolution, and, like the Revolution, Valdés claims, mired in the frustration of the collapse of what began as endless promise. Patria, street-smart and irreverent, torn between her passion for two men, narrates a tale that seeks to capture the urgency and despondency of life in Cuba after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 'período especial' that has reduced everydayness in Cuba to a new level of despair.

*La nada cotidiana* was praised by critics both in Europe – where it first appeared in French before its publication in Spanish – and in Latin America for its humor and biting critique of Cuban everyday reality. Many critics found its style – built on an inventive use of language that is both highly poetic and deeply earthy – dazzling and bold. The novel, energetic and intense, is marked by its acerbic sense of humor, its disregard for accepted truths and meaningless slogans, and its irreverence towards hollow dreams of utopia.

Valdés followed her success with *La nada cotidiana* with a third novel, *La hija del embajador* (1995), for which she won the Premio Novela Breve Juan March Cencillo. In this novel Valdés draws upon her experiences in the Cuban Embassy in France to tell the tale of Daniela, the daughter of the Cuban ambassador to Paris, as she struggles between her identity as a Cuban, an identity marked by its exuberant sensuality, and the studied eroticism and inner coldness that she finds in Europe. The furious eroticism of the tale becomes an act of defiance against the stifling oppression of diplomatic mores.

In *Te di la vida entera* (1996), a finalist for the Planeta Literary Prize, Valdés returns to the topic of desire, hope, and disillusionment, this time through sixty years in the life of Cuca, a young woman who comes to pre-revolutionary Havana shortly after her sixteenth birthday. Exploring the flavour and rhythms of Havana night life in the 1950s with two voluptuous older prostitutes who

befriend her, she encounters a mysterious man who after a frenzied dance and a passionate kiss disappears without a trace, leaving her hopelessly in love and holding on to a one-dollar bill he has entrusted to her care. When they reunite eight years later, they embark on a fiery love affair. Ultimately finding herself alone again, Cuca, whose life changes every time she hears a *bolero*, throws all her energy into raising her daughter and waiting for her lover's return. Her life mirrors the story of the Revolution, moving from elation and passion through degradation, want, misery and absurdity. The novel takes the reader along this path to the rhythm of the Cuban music, chiefly *boleros*, that seem to control Cuca's life.

In *Café Nostalgia* (1999), Valdés returns to the bolero as the evocative backdrop to her tale of a Cuban woman living in Paris who seeks to hold on to her memories of Havana through her readings. As she reads, she writes letters to the people who have been important to her; the letters, which remain unsent, become her text. Here, the elements familiar to readers of Valdés's work – eroticism, the plight of women in unrequited love, the separation from the homeland – lack the freshness and vitality of earlier work. But the musical evocation, as an element that Valdés incorporates fully and organically into the text, offers enough that is new to account for the interest of this recent work. The musical group Grupo Café Nostalgia (named after the Little Havana jazz club on Miami's Calle Ocho) recorded a soundtrack for *Te di la vida entera*.

Valdés's *Querido primero novio*, published in 2000, also explores the problems of memory and of living in the past. Dánae, living in frustrated claustrophobia in the city, pursuing her domestic chores as if they were battles against fierce foes, finds refuge in the memories of childhood, in particular those of a first boyfriend through whom she had discovered the vital power of eroticism to fulfill a woman's life.

In addition to her novels, Valdés has published a novella, *Ira de ángeles* (1996), a book for children, *Los arêtes de la luna* (1999), and a collection of fifteen short stories, *Traficantes de belleza* (1998). In the latter, a text that could be read like a fragmented novel, Valdés creates a cast of characters in pursuit of beauty, transfixed by the possibility of beauty entering their drab lives, like the contemporary Cuban girl who comes across Arthur Rimbaud in Havana's Cathedral Square as he is playing the leading role in a film, or the artist whose drawings of dunes leave him stranded in the desert, or the young dancer of the Parisien Café metamorphosed briefly into an Arabian princess.

Banking on her visibility as a writer, Valdés has established herself as an outspoken critic of the Castro regime, primarily through occasional columns written for the Spanish version of the *Miami Herald*. As such she was one of the women featured in *Cuban Women: Branded by Paradise*, a documentary about the effects of the Cuban Revolution on women that also profiles Celia Cruz and Castro's daughter. Established as a literary celebrity, in 1998 she was selected as one of the ten-member jury at the Cannes festival. Valdés has been a Spanish citizen since 1997, when the expiration of her Cuban passport, which the Cuban regime had refused to renew because of her political stance against the Castro

government, had led to her being refused entry into many countries, including Britain and the United States.

## The Dominican Republic

The Dominican Republic, a nation of poets, has produced very few women prose writers – and only one of real note in recent years, Angela Hernández-Nuñez.<sup>1</sup> Angela Hernández's literary career, born in 1985 with the publication of *Desafío*, a collection of poems, blossomed in 1988, when her first book of prose pieces, *Las mariposas no temen a los cactus*, embryonic tales she had meant as consciousness-raising vignettes, startled Dominican audiences with their candid exploration of forbidden topics – abortion, wife-battering, lack of paternal responsibility – culled from commonplace incidents in Dominican society. These proto-stories already displayed Hernández's ability to create deeply-etched characters moving awkwardly between their aspirations (however modest) and a world out of tune with (when not openly hostile to) their dreams.

This disharmony between a lush internal world where dreams and passions lurk and the mundane terrain of everydayness characterizes 'Cómo recoger la sombra de las flores', the first of Hernández's short stories, which won her the 1988 Casa del Teatro Literary Prize and anchored her first book of stories, *Alótopos*. By the time she published her second collection of short stories, *Masticar una rosa*, in 1993 – mediated by two collections of poems, *Tizne y cristal* (1987) and *Edades de asombro* (1990) – her standing as the foremost Dominican prose writer of her generation was assured. With *Alótopos* – Marcio Veloz Maggiolo would declare in his postscript to the book – Angela Hernández had reached a summit in Dominican writing; these stories, by a writer virtually unknown until then, surprised as much by the maturity and assuredness of their craft as by their 'halo of mystery and a fine sense of poetry', their 'murmuring vision of love and enigmas.' 'Cómo recoger la sombra de las flores', as an early text, already highlighted Hernández's talent for rendering women's erotic expression, here sprinkled lightly with humour as Faride's sophisticated erotic fantasies clash against the shock and bewilderment of her very proper parents and siblings.

Hernández's stories are deeply rooted in the loveliness and connection to nature of her childhood town of Jarabacoa. The dream-like backdrop to female desire of 'Cómo recoger ...' appears with the same subtleness in 'Teresa Irene', where a young girl – modeled after a girl found naked and drowned in Jarabacoa's river, her hair floating downstream in the current – is transformed into a literary character, a beautiful, waif-like young girl trapped by the rainbow, at last happy and fulfilled in her underwater grave.

1 The country's most outstanding novelist of the twentieth century, Aída Cartagena Portalatín, died recently and the other two notable Dominican novelists writing today, Julia Alvarez and Loida Maritza Pérez, write in English and fall, therefore, outside the scope of this review.

The mundane life of Jarabacoa, its characters, dramas and tragedies, merges in this tales with the glory of its surrounding landscape, possessing the writer and the writing. Faride, in 'How to Gather the Shadows of the Flowers', yearns to withdraw from stifling village life into the enchanted space of profuse nature and fulfilled passion. The protagonist of 'Hurricane of Shadows', from Hernández's second collection of stories, *Masticar una rosa* (Gnawing on a Rose), echoes the writer's childhood memories of having lived Trujillo's dictatorship 'only through the adults' fear, through the terror of eyes scanning the sky for planes, when men were recruited to join the vanguard of an army searching the hills for strange beings (heartless, they said) known as *barbudos* (the bearded ones). Jarabacoa's 'pure images of touchable beauty' stalk Hernández, its people haunt her. As she writes in the postscript to *Alótopos*, she has 'felt my town siege me like an all-powerful being, transformed into a thousand eyes tracking my steps, scrutinize my thoughts, restrict my freedom; it ties me to its limits, to its small-town traditions, to its crossroads of inquisitive murmurings tracing the footprints of everything that is known, ignoring the nuances of situations, people's evolution, or the dialectics of their expectations.' There is in this affirmation of connection to a place of marvellous beauty and commonplace everydayness a certainty of belonging, an avowal of rootedness, that gives Hernández' literary voice its strength and uniqueness. It brands even tales of exile, travel and potential alienation, like 'Commonplaces' and 'Chronicle of a Simple Man' with a centredness which constitutes the characters' protection against despair.

Since the publication of *Masticar una rosa* in 1993, Hernández has published two additional prose texts: *Piedra de sacrificio* (1998), a collection of short stories that won the Premio Nacional de Cuentos in the year of its publication as well as the Premio Cole de Literatura, and a novella, *Mudanza de los sentidos* (2001). *Piedra de sacrificio* returns to the urban settings of *Masticar una rosa* to imbue them with the magical aura of the countryside through the voices of characters rooted in rural splendours who have to settle for an urban absence of color. In *Mudanza de los sentidos*, a Caribbean *bildungsroman*, the voice of a young girl that served Hernández so well in *Masticar una rosa*, emerges as the filter for the horrid experiences of growing up in the turmoil that has been Dominican history in the latter half of the twentieth century. A mature work that draws upon Hernández's experience as a short story writer, *Mudanza de los sentidos* gives voice to the emerging novelist.

## Puerto Rico

The decade of the 1990s was one of transition for Puerto Rican women writers. After flowering in the 1980s, voices of such importance as Ana Lydia Vega, Magali García Ramis and Carmen Lugo Filippi fell relatively silent. Rosario Ferré, the island's most prominent prose writer during the 1980s, became the centre of controversy as she began to write and publish her work in English. Olga Nolla, whose productivity as a prose writer in the second half of the decade

rivalled that of Zoé Valdés, died unexpectedly of a heart attack in August 2001. Into the space opened by these sudden silences stepped newer voices: most prominently those of Mayra Santos Febres and Mayra Montero.

Rosario Ferré, Puerto Rico's foremost novelist and short-story writer of the 1980s and early 1990s, had a prolific if controversial decade. In the early 1990s she struggled as she searched for new approaches and themes for her fiction. Her novella, *La batalla de las vírgenes* (1993) and her book of poems, *Las dos Venecias* (1992) – which appeared between the publication of her collection of essays, *El árbol y su sombra* (1992) and of the critical study based on her doctoral dissertation, *Cortázar: el romántico en su observatorio* (1994) – were not critical successes. *La batalla de las vírgenes*, a satire on religious fanaticism that Ferré described as 'too racy' for Puerto Rican readers at the time of publication, tells of the impact on a Puerto Rican family of a visit to Medjugorje in Yugoslavia. *Las dos Venecias*, primarily a collection of poems, also includes a lovely short story, 'El cuento envenenado'.

It was at this juncture that Ferré's work took a controversial turn. Aware that translations of her fiction had enjoyed considerable success in the American market, and in response to generous offers from American publishers who found original work in English more profitable than translations – and who saw in Ferré, a writer of established reputation, a perfect bridge to the Latino market – she had agreed to begin writing in English. In Puerto Rico, a nation that had made of the Spanish language – and of literature written in Spanish – the symbol of resistance against American political control and cultural influence, the decision was greeted with shock and she came under attack from writers and critics alike. Despite the success of her first English-language book, *The House on the Lagoon* (1997), which was a finalist for the prestigious National Book Award in the United States, her reputation as a Latin American – and particularly a Puerto Rican – writer has yet to recover.

In 1992, Ferré published a biography of her father, Luis A. Ferré, former governor of the island and leader of the pro-statehood political party, the Partido Nuevo Progresista. The text, *Memorias de Ponce: Autobiografía de Luis A. Ferré*, is purportedly the edited transcript, narrated in her father's own words, of conversations between Ferré and her father recorded in 1986. A tribute to her father's political work and to his construction of Puerto Rico's most important art museum (to which he donated his remarkable personal art collection), it includes a handful of his poems and political speeches and a selection of photographs. Although not a literary text per se, it entered critical discussion of Ferré's work after her controversial decision to write in English, as evidence of her reconciliation with conservative political and familial roots that she had consistently denounced through her earlier writing. It prompted public discussions of her support for Puerto Rican statehood after decades of repudiation of American colonialism on the island. Ferré defended her change in political opinion by stating repeatedly through interviews and writings that there had been positive changes in the nature of American colonialism in the island during the past thirty years that made statehood palatable, and that in the

intervening years Puerto Rican culture had blended so well with American culture as to become a hybrid phenomenon. Severing Puerto Ricans from either culture would essentially maim them.

*The House on the Lagoon* returns to material Ferré had explored so successfully in her earlier fiction – that of the lives of upper-class women caught in loveless oppressive marriages. Here, the autobiographical element emerges in the main character's preoccupation with becoming a writer, a familiar theme in Ferré's work. Isabel, a fledgling novelist struggling to come to terms with her personal and familial history through writing must contend with her husband Quintín (a historian) and his rewriting of her narrative through his own contradictory version of events. Their increasingly acrid point/counterpoint, built on ideological disagreements about Puerto Rico's political status, racial issues, and the place of women in Puerto Rican society, ultimately threatens to destroy what on the surface had seemed a perfect marriage and family. The book was praised by critics above all for its graceful weaving of the problems of writing and interpreting history into a powerful drama of characters torn by their own self-discovery.

Ferré's second English-language book, *Eccentric Neighborhoods* (1999), was almost equally successful with critics and readers. Like *The House on the Lagoon*, this novel offers another upper-class Puerto Rican family saga, this time revolving around three generations in the lives of two Puerto Rican merchant families. Elvira Vernet, the narrator, is the focus of an exploration of familial interactions (particularly through her relationship to her mother) that stand as representative of colonial and patriarchal structures in Puerto Rican history. Heavily autobiographical, *Eccentric Neighborhoods* explores Elvira's place in a male-dominated family of Cuban immigrants living in a town very much like Ferré's native Ponce. The Vernets, in the process of transforming the island to a burgeoning industrial society, attempt to lay the foundations for political independence. Their alliance with the aristocratic Rivas de Santillana clan, representatives of the old Spanish landed oligarchy through Elvira's mother, is meant to cement the foundations of a dynasty threatened at every point by death, heartache, unrequited love, infidelity, paternalism, rampant ambition, and suicide. The interwoven topics, already familiar to readers of *Sweet Diamond Dust* and *The House on the Lagoon*, seem somewhat oversimplified in *Eccentric Neighborhoods*, coming at times perilously close to self-parody.

In 2000, Ferré published *A la sombra de tu nombre*, a collection of essays on a broad variety of topics, from personal memoir through reflections on writing to dialogues with famous cultural figures of the past. It includes literary reviews (such as that of Mario Vargas Llosa's 2000 novel on Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo, *La fiesta del chivo*, reminiscences on her life in Puerto Rico (on Old San Juan's historic cemetery, the ghosts that haunt the old city, old boleros, scents, and gardens), and literary and pseudo-literary essays on the likes of James Michener and Michel Foucault. The strongest of these essays are the ones that address the literature and popular traditions of the Caribbean. As she had done

repeatedly in previous decades, Ferré also continued to publish children's literature during the 1990s: *El sombrero mágico* appeared in 1996, followed by *La sapita sabia y otros cuentos* in 1997.

Ferré's most recent publication, *Flight of the Swan* (2001), is a novel inspired by the life of Anna Pavlova, the famous Russian ballet dancer. It is the third of Ferré's novels to be written and published initially in English. It tells of how an aging prima ballerina, Niura Federovsky, having fled her country during the Russian Revolution in 1917, finds herself stranded without a passport in Puerto Rico for three months. There she falls in love with a revolutionary half her age, twenty-year-old Diamantino, whose comrades take her and her ragtag troupe of dancers around the island, where they perform for the locals. The novel is narrated by Madame Federovsky's devoted servant Masha, who, born a peasant in Minsk, can recognize and understand the varieties of oppression she witnesses on the island.

The novel, although not lacking in interest despite the richness of the historical detail, appears at times contrived and lacking in emotional resonance, especially when compared with a similar effort, that of Mayra Montero's *Como un mensajero tuyo* which uses as a point of departure a similar visit of Enrico Caruso to Cuba. The reason for this is perhaps the wealth of historical detail itself offered by Ferré – perhaps in an attempt to contextualize for the American reader what the Puerto Rican reader would accept as a given – which at times overwhelms the narrative itself. Critics have found it a disappointing follow-up to *the House on the Lagoon*, describing its prose as pedestrian and lacklustre in comparison.

A surprisingly strong narrative voice during this decade was that of Olga Nolla, Ferré's cousin and co-editor (with Ferré) of the influential 1970s journal *Zona de carga y descarga*. Known throughout her literary career as a poet, Nolla blossomed as a prose writer in the 1990s. In 1990 she published a collection of short stories, *Porque nos queremos tanto*, which she followed with her first novel, *La Segunda hija* (1992). Two other novels, *El Castillo de la memoria* and *El manuscrito de Miramar*, were published in 1996 and 1998 respectively. *Porque nos queremos tanto* gathered stories of small-town malaise and painful hypocrisy, such as 'La felicidad de Robertito', the tale of a spoiled upper-class adolescent whose world is shattered when he discovers the beautiful young nun he adores in an erotic bolero dance with the school's young priest. Similar in theme to the handful of uncollected tales Nolla had published throughout the 1970s and 1980s, these tales did not match the technical daring of earlier tales like 'En esta casa no puede haber polvo' or 'Besitos de coco.' In *La Segunda hija*, an ambitious but comparatively stilted tale, Nolla writes of the experiences of an upper-middle class family that migrates from rural Puerto Rico to urban Massachusetts, offering a version of migration that points to the class-bound nature of most tales of Puerto Rican exile. The publication of *La Segunda hija* became the cause of controversy in Puerto Rico when the text was censured by the then Secretary of Education, José Arsenio Torres, as a text whose erotic content and radical notions made it unacceptable for the Puerto Rican school curriculum.

*El Castillo de la memoria*, Nolla's meditation on the history of *hispanidad* in Puerto Rican culture, also appeared in 1998. In *El Castillo de la memoria* Nolla returns to the sixteenth century to imagine what Puerto Rican history could have been if Ponce de León had returned to Puerto Rico after having succeeded in locating the Fountain of Youth, immortalizing in the process the New World as the embodiment of the spirit of the Renaissance spirit. Nolla's intention – that of making an immortal Ponce de León, tortured by his own immortality, the axis around which Puerto Rican history revolves – allows her imaginatively to reinvent the story of the nation.

The publication of *El manuscrito de Miramar* completely transformed Nolla's profile as a prose writer. In it she weaves together the stories of two upper-class women – mother and daughter – through the discovery of a manuscript that unveils the silence that has served as a veil covering stories of desire, infidelity and longing. Already a grandmother by the time María Isabel finds her dead mother's diaries in a forgotten trunk, she finds in the yellowing pages a wealth of erotic fantasies and intimacies never meant for her daughter's eyes. The recovered manuscript establishes as dialogue with María Isabel's own attempt to reconcile her image of her mother with this new vision of a woman writing of secret desires, adultery and other illicit passions. Her exploration of female sexuality, begun in *Porque nos queremos tanto*, blossoms in *El manuscrito de Miramar* with great vitality and originality.

Ana Lydia Vega, whose often hilarious short stories – collected in *Encancaranublado y otros cuentos de naufragio* (1982) and *Pasión de historia y otras historias de pasión* (1987) – set the tone for Puerto Rican feminist literature in the 1980s, opened the decade with a fresh book of tales, *Falsas crónicas del sur* (1991), which gathers together eight tales inspired by Puerto Rican history. As she did with detective fiction in *Pasión de historia*, where she parodied that popular genre as the basis for her exploration of a wife's puzzling disappearance (*à la Rear Window*), here Vega calls upon a number of genres – the Romantic novel, the tale of adventure, social satire, the political chronicle – to turn history inside out, helping us to look at familiar incidents from the individual's perspective, bringing history (and the folkloric interpretation of history) into the realm of the everyday occurrence and personal drama. Vega, in her preface to the book, speaks of her commitment to extensive research for this project, which involved visits to libraries and archives as well as countless interviews with Puerto Ricans of the southern coastal towns, as a tribute to the world of her mother. The resulting stories are testimonies to the Puerto Rican collective imagination and its distinctive take on history. Two stories stand out from this collection as perhaps most representative of Vega's new themes and approaches in this collection: 'El baúl de Miss Florence: Fragmentos para un novelón romántico', a novella that has Samuel Morse's daughter as a central character, and 'Un Domingo de Lillianne', which chronicles the Ponce Massacre from the perspective of a young upper-middle-class girl.

Vega, however, has not published any additional books of fiction since *Falsas crónicas del sur*, although she has completed a book of essays during this period.

*El tramo ancla: ensayos puertorriqueños de hoy* (1988), which Vega edited with fellow columnist Kalman Barsy, gathered the essays published in 'Relevo', the column published throughout 1985 in the leftist weekly *Claridad* by Vega, Barsy, Mayra Montero and Carmen Lugo Filippi. A second collection, *Esperando a Loló y otros delirios generacionales*, published in 1996, gathers an assortment of Vega's satiric essays on Puerto Rican society, politics and mores. The texts, autobiographical and feminist as we have come to expect from Vega, expand on the critique of Puerto Rico's abortive bilingualism and ambivalent nationalism that are deemed responsible for the island's continued identity crisis. They also expose, as did Vega's fiction throughout the 1980s, the problematic role of women writers in a society such as that of Puerto Rico, where patriarchal role models and rampant machismo continue to relegate them to the periphery of the literary tradition. The essays, vibrant and irreverent as they are, revisit familiar topics and textual strategies, failing in the process to open new thematic and stylistic avenues for Vega. More promising of new approaches in her fiction perhaps are the books for children Vega published in 1998, *Celita y el mangle zapatero* and *En la bahía de Jobos*, with illustrations by Yolanda Pastrana Fuentes, about the preservation of Puerto Rico's rich mangrove environments. The environmental preoccupations of this text, simplified here for a juvenile audience, may point to new possibilities in her fiction.

Carmen Lugo Filippi, co-author, with Ana Lydia Vega, of the groundbreaking *Vígenes y mártires* (1981), published *Narromaniando con Mirta, o, No me platicues más* in 1999 after almost two decades of silence. The text, which she describes as a novel but reads best as a loosely connected set of ten stories of love and abandonment, written to the accompaniment of obsessive Caribbean *boleros*. In 1997, Lugo Filippi published a study of the contemporary Puerto Rican short story, *Los cuentistas y el cuento: encuesta entre cultivadores del género*. She followed this in 1998 with a collaboration with writer and critic Josemilio González on a translation of 19th-century Puerto Rican patriot Ramón Emeterio Betances's *Les deux indiens: épisode de la conquête de Borinquen*, published as *Los dos indios: episodio de la conquista de Borinquen*.

Magali García Ramis, whose *Felices días, tío Sergio* (1986) had redefined the Puerto Rican *Bildungsroman*, published a collection of short stories, *Las noches del riel de oro*, in 1997. In this volume García Ramis begins to distance her work from the familial, autobiographical themes of *La familia de todos nosotros*, the collection she had published in 1988, whose topics were closely connected to the *Bildungsroman* aspects of *Felices días*. Firmly grounded in Puerto Rican popular culture, with *salsa* and other forms of popular music providing a thematic foundation to tales like 'Cuando canten Maestra Vida' and 'Solita con las estrellas', the tales explore San Juan's urban culture and the obsessions to which it can lead. Of particular interest are 'Cuando canten Maestra Vida', about the *habituées* of a somewhat seedy Old San Juan bar, and 'Frituras y lunas', about a man's incestuous obsession with his daughter, which leads him to murder a young man who buys the last fritter available from a vendor, the very fritter his daughter had requested.

During this decade, García Ramis also published a collection of essays, *La ciudad que me habita* (1997), about her own obsession with San Juan, particularly the colonial section that is at once beautiful and sordid. The essays, whether a celebration of the everydayness of mundane activities such as riding the bus, a lamentation of the absurdity of debates over choosing a national bird or the name for a first-born, a hilarious rumination on the lard that cements Puerto Ricans as a people, or the moving tribute to a writer dead from AIDS, speak of García Ramis' love for the city that possesses and inspires her.

Of all Puerto Rican writers of the 1990s the most important and innovative voice was that of Mayra Montero, born in Cuba but a resident of Puerto Rico for most of her life. Montero opened the decade with the publication of a short story, 'Corinne, muchacha amable' (1991), that followed upon a collection of vignettes, *Ventitrés y una tortuga*, which had appeared in 1981. In this story of a young woman turned into a zombie by the lover she has spurned, Montero is particularly interested in deploying the familiar conventions of the Gothic genre to lay bare the Haitian people's struggle against the Duvalier government, here represented by the dreaded Tonton Macoutes, the regime's feared militia. This commitment was already evident in her first novel, *La trenza de la hermosa luna* (1987), a beautifully rendered tale of an exile's return to Haiti after twenty years as a wandering sailor and of the transformation that leads him from disillusionment to passionate commitment to action against the Duvalier regime. The novel, which could be read as Montero's tribute to the texts of two crucial writers in Haitian literature, Jacques Roumain and Jacques-Stéphen Alexis, follows Jean Leroy in his mission to take some mysterious powders to the interior of the island that would make it possible for Vodou priests to protect their followers as they embark on an armed struggle against the Duvaliers. The novel marked Montero as the talent to watch in Puerto Rican writing, a promise that she has fulfilled repeatedly in the period since *La trenza de la hermosa luna* first dazzled critics.

Montero is, of all contemporary Caribbean writers, the most indebted to the Euro-American Gothic tradition, which she has made her own, transforming the familiar conventions through her deep knowledge of Caribbean magico-religious traditions and her concerns for social justice. As she did in 'Corinne, muchacha amable' and *La trenza de la hermosa luna*, she appropriates the Gothic in *Del rojo de tu sombra* (1992), to unveil the vicious and corrupt politics and African-derived religious traditions that link the Dominican Republic and Haiti despite the enmity that has existed between the countries for centuries. In this, her most purely Gothic novel to date, Montero tells the disturbing tale of the contest of wills between the leaders of two Vodou societies – Mistress Zulé, an inexperienced but gifted priestess, and Similá Bolesseto, a notoriously violent and devious priest – and the disastrous impact on their religious communities, composed mostly of Haitians who have crossed the border into the Dominican Republic to cut sugar cane in slavery-like conditions. The world conjured by Montero as a backdrop to this struggle is terrifying in its festering hatred, self-destructive greed and sexual jealousy. The struggle, played out through the



casting of spells meant to torture, maim, and kill, becomes more horrifying when the *loa*, the capricious gods of the Vodou pantheon, use the worshippers they possess during rituals as puppets in bloody dramas of their own, with disastrous results.

In *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995), Montero returns to the production of horror that served her so well in 'Corinne, muchacha amable' in the tale of American herpetologist Victor Grigg who, with the aid of his Haitian guide Thierry Adrien, is on a quest for an elusive and threatened blood frog, extinct everywhere but on a dangerous, eerie mountain near Port-au-Prince. In the volatile and bloody setting of the Haitian mountains, controlled by violent thugs, through her weaving together the stories and vastly different world views of her two protagonists, Montero uncovers a new haunting post-colonial space built upon the conflict between a scientific and an animistic worldview: the extinction of species due to a collapsing environment; the troubled landscape of Haiti, peopled with zombies and other frightening, other-worldly creatures; political corruption, violence and religious turmoil.

In her essay 'The Great Bonanza of the Antilles', Montero writes of how she 'suspected in some way, even at [an] early age, that there was a philosophy in the [Afro-Caribbean] cults of Ocha, Palo Monte, Vodou, and Espiritismo de Cordón that in one way or another expressed an integral conception of the world – a concept of man and of his organic relationship with the world.' Expanding on that notion of man's organic relationship with the world he inhabits, in *Tú, la oscuridad* she turns the quest for the elusive and rare frog into a voyage into a heart of darkness only possible in a Caribbean region, where the forces of politics, neo-colonialism and violence threaten the very environment that makes spirituality possible. In her exploration of the propagation and extinction of species in the natural world, paralleled by the narrative of how the mysterious forces of nature govern the fate of all living creatures, Montero extends the link between man's spiritual relation to the natural world to encompass man's own vulnerability in environments that are pushing species to the verge of extinction. The possible existence of the last remaining specimens of the *Eleutherodactylis sanguineus* in Haiti's Mont des Enfants Perdus, the Mountain of Lost Children, points to the lost innocence that the despoiling of nature implies for Caribbean societies.

Montero's concerns with Caribbean spirituality, particularly as represented by the Afro-Caribbean religious practices that have been at the heart of so much of her fiction, maintain their centrality in her 1998 novel, *Como un mensajero tuyo*. Narrated by a young Cuban woman of Chinese and African ancestry, it relates the secret events that transpired when, during a series of performances in Cuba in 1920, legendary tenor Enrico Caruso fled for his life into the streets of Havana after a bomb exploded in the theater where he was rehearsing Verdi's *Aida*. Rescued by the narrator's mother, Aída Petrinera Chang, the seriously ill Caruso embarks on an adventure that takes him from an intense affair that will result in the narrator's birth to a search for a Santería priest who can heal him – or at least protect his lover from sharing his fate.

In *Como un mensajero tuyo*, Montero draws upon stories she had heard as a child about a woman who claimed to be the tenor's daughter, as well as upon the mystery of Caruso's disappearance from the Teatro Nacional de La Habana in June 1920, weaving the two into a fiction linking Caruso's fate (he would die shortly after leaving Cuba) with the world of Afro-Caribbean religious practices. The novel is steeped in two parallel traditions, that of Aída's godfather's African-derived Santería and the complementary healing practices of Afro-Chinese magic, a blend that results in what enthusiastic critics have called a 'many-layered', 'mesmerizing' tale.

Montero also established herself during the 1990s as the Caribbean's foremost writer of erotic fiction. Her two erotic novels, *La última noche que pasé contigo* (1991) and *Púrpura profundo* (2000), fuse two deep interests: the nature of erotic desire and its connection to Caribbean popular music. Montero, who had been a finalist in 1991 for the Sonrisa Vertical Prize – given in Barcelona by the prestigious Tusquets Press for the best erotic novel written in Spanish in a given year – for *La última noche ...* – won the prize in 2000 for *Púrpura Profundo*.

*La última noche que pasé contigo*, an ever-so-slightly parodic erotic tale, tells of the encounters of a late-middle-aged couple suffering from empty-nest syndrome who look to a Caribbean cruise as a way out of their boredom with each other. Their sexual adventures in the highly eroticized Caribbean of the tourist imagination play against the rhythms and sentimental universe of the Latin American *bolero*, from the classic 'La última noche que pasé contigo', which provides the novel's title, to the more contemporary variations of the genre by Dominican star Juan Luis Guerra. The various interwoven narratives grow increasingly explicit in their depictions of erotic behaviour as the main characters penetrate the Caribbean space and shed their inhibitions, bringing themselves as close to sexual ecstasy as to self-destruction. The novel has been praised by critics as much for the rich profusion of its sexual imagery as for the dark humour and subtlety with which it exposes cultural clichés and the often absurd connections between desire and death.

Montero continues to explore the connection between music and eroticism in her award-winning erotic novel *Púrpura profundo*. Its narrator, Agustín Cabán, a music critic who has hoarded the memories of his erotic adventures like a scrupulous miser, is persuaded by his editor to narrate his varied and complex sexual life in vivid detail. Featured prominently in them are Virginia Tuten, a beautiful mulatta from Antigua who handled her violin like an eroticized body, and Clint Verret, a pianist that took him to the verge of homosexual love. *Púrpura profundo* differs from her earlier erotic novel in its single narrative perspective (*La última noche que pasé contigo* has multiple points of views and incorporates multiple types of texts, particularly letters), which allows Montero to delve deeper into her narrator's psychology and build a more vivid, more deeply etched main character.

In addition to her prize-winning fiction, in 1996 Montero published an anthology of the essays she had written since 1992 for her weekly column in the Puerto Rican newspaper *El Nuevo Día*. The sometimes irreverent pieces of

*Aguaceros dispersos* – whose topics include an elderly woman reminiscing on her youth in Port-au-Prince (Haiti), a rooster roaming through San Juan, the story of a general who dies on the same day of his arrival in the island he came to govern, and the assorted items forgotten in the clothing taken to the cleaners – offer a fascinating glimpse into the everydayness of life in Puerto Rico and surrounding islands.

Of the new generation of Puerto Rican writers that follows in the wake of Ferré, Lugo Filippi, and Montero, Mayra Santos Febres is the most accomplished. Known as a poet – she has published to date a number of poetry books, including *El orden escapade* (1991), *Anamú y manigua* (1991), and *Tercer mundo* (2000) – she has emerged in the last five years as a gifted prose writer. Her first book of short stories, *Pez de vidrio* (1994), won the Letras de Oro literary prize. In 1996 ‘Oso blanco’, featured in her second collection of stories, *El cuerpo correcto*, won the prestigious Juan Rulfo Prize in Paris. In 2000, her novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* established her reputation as the leading voice among Puerto Rico’s young writers.

The texts of Santos Febres’ *Pez de vidrio* and *El cuerpo correcto* are erotic urban vignettes about desire and its frustration as they play themselves out in contemporary Puerto Rico. In ‘La fragancia de Marina’, for example, a woman selects her perfume based on the kind of reaction she wants to elicit from men, while in ‘Abnel, dulce pesadilla’, a female voyeur describes her thrilling sensations while she watches men showering. ‘Dilcia M.’ tells of a frustrated young woman imprisoned for her participation in an armed struggle for Puerto Rican independence. Santos Febres’ interest in homoeroticism and popular music, and her concern with the exploration of the writing process, link these tales.

These concerns find ample room for development in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, the story of a gay teenage boy earning a living on the streets, and of the transvestite who recognizes the crystalline sweetness of his singing voice and helps him become a famous *travestí* in the Dominican Republic. It is also the parallel story of Leocadio, a Dominican boy who knows himself to be different because of his special sensibilities and the ways in which he awakens male desires. Santos Febres’s exploration of sexual ambiguity and unsanctioned desire, her command of musical allusion and the technical skill with which she can incorporate music and rhythm into her text, and her manipulation of language as a disturbing element in her text – at once erotic and humorous – all contribute to making *Sirena Selena* ... one of the best Puerto Rican novels in recent years.

Santos Febres has also made her mark as a literary critic, taking the leadership among writers of her generation in establishing the parameters that will guide their work. In addition to various critical essays in journals and magazines, and of her doctoral dissertation (‘The Translocal Papers: Gender and Nation in Contemporary Puerto Rican Literature’), in 1997 she published *Mal(h)ab(l)ar: Antología de nueva literatura puertorriqueña*. She teaches Latin American literature at the University of Puerto Rico. Filmmaker Sonia Fritz has made three short films (*Tres cortometrajes de Sonia Fritz*, 1999) based on Santos Febres’ short stories – ‘Nightstand’, ‘Dulce Pesadilla’, and ‘Hebra rota.’

In this panoramic look at the work of Hispanic Caribbean women writers in the past decades, some conclusions seem almost transparent. The gender-wars feminism that characterized the previous two decades has given way to a more complex representation of sexuality. Erotic expression, rather rare when Margarite Fernández Olmos and I compiled the texts that appeared in *El placer de la palabra: literatura erotica femenina de América Latina* in 1981, seems to have been almost *de rigueur* for writers working in the 1990s. The variety of erotic expression, when one considers the number of writers known for the erotic content of their prose – Valdés, Montero, Santo Febres, Nolla, Ferré, Angela Hernández – puts Caribbean writers at the forefront of this genre in Latin America. The engagement with Afro-Caribbean religions, a theme that surfaced only occasionally in women’s writing before this decade, has been at the centre of some of the most significant texts written during this period. A preoccupation with the environment seems poised to take centre stage in women’s creativity in the Hispanic Caribbean. And as musical background to all these efforts, we find Caribbean popular music, particularly the bittersweet cadences of the *bolero*, the repository of a way of life and a nostalgia for the past that provides the common thread that makes of the Caribbean a shared space.

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