

Pollito Chicken: Split Subjectivity, National Identity and The Articulation of Female Sexuality in a Narrative

by Ana Lydia Vega

The unconscious of the work-[not of the author]-is constructed in the moment of its entry into literary form in the gap between the [ideological] project and the formulation. . . . The object of the critic, then, is to seek not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions.¹

Humanism, the dominant ideology of our time, posits a unified subject, one that is in control of his or her actions, always fully conscious and not the house divided against itself that the Freudians are always bringing up. It is easy to see why Freud and Lacan would be unpopular figures in two of the movements that define political discourse in the world today: movements of national liberation and the women's movement. Humanism's unified subject is a much more comforting figure than the angst-ridden, insecure, desiring subject posited by psychoanalysis, a decentered subject that comes into being upon its entry into a symbolic order over which it holds no sway, what Fredric Jameson calls "the prison-house of language."² Those who work towards political change in the movements mentioned tend, for the most part, to posit a human subject that moves forward in a straight line, looking neither left nor right, and certainly not back or into a morass of drives, desires and fears of castration.

But this view of a unified human subject is inaccurate, and no one is in a better position to see its inaccuracy than those whose craft is language, those engaged in elaborating fictional characters out of the slippery elements of language. They know best that despite their efforts, despite their wish for control over the signifier, the space between the word and its object is not the unproblematical straight line of the Saussurian model. Instead, this space between the word and the object is peopled, teeming with the intentions of others. There is always more than one voice in every head, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, so even the concept of a simple authorial intention, a concept born of that linguistic model, must be replaced with a more complex notion of a discourse aimed at an object but is everywhere refracted by the intentions, the "readings" of others, as well

as by the divisions—for what else is polyphony than that—of our own socially constituted selves.³ This makes the commonsense notion of authenticity problematical, for once we accept, with Lacan, a subject constituted in a split, we can no longer speak of an "authentic" subject or even of straightforward identity as such.⁴ There are too many possible shifts in position for that. And, once we accept, with Bakhtin, the notion of a "refracted" word, we open the text up to the element of contingency, to the response of the reader, to the cultural text into which—and out of which—it is inscribed.

All of which brings us to language. If the human subject is constituted through the signifying practice of language, where does that leave those who, like the fictional Suzie Bermudez of our tale, are constituted not in one national language, but in two. Why, it leaves them split, of course (doubly split?). But Suzie's problems do not end there; she is even further split because she cannot decide just what national identity she *does* have and, anyway, she is only on vacation trying to have a good time, so why ask her to define herself? Since the fictive narrator of this story is being so cruel to Suzie, it is only fair for us to come to her rescue, if only to argue that if *she* is split, so is the text in which she resides.

The story "Pollito Chicken" by Ana Lydia Vega,⁵ lends itself to numerous productive readings in the locus where the politics of language, national identity and sexuality intersect. The story begins with an epigraph from Albert Memmi, "Un homme a cheval sur deux cultures est rarement bien assis," a man on horseback between two cultures is rarely well seated. Two things can come to mind to the initiated reader who is going through this text for at least a second time: first, the "man" referred to in the epigraph is a woman (skewing number one) and second, the story is not "about" what we expected from the title (skewing number two). The culturally encoded "Pollito Chicken" refers to the mindless lyrics through which a whole generation of *island* Puerto Ricans were miseducated in English,⁶ and not to the members of a later generation—the Nuyoricans—whose parents forced to emigrate to the mainland following the establishment of Operation Bootstrap in Puerto Rico. The "asimilaos" to which Juan Flores refers in his piece on Puerto Rican culture on the mainland⁷ were never exposed to "Pollito Chicken" but rather to an even more vicious jingle/jungle known as the New York City Public School System and others like it in the metropolitan areas of the core country. So the title is a false clue, one which indexes a contradiction (there are others) between the story's ideological project and what is possible for it to do, given the type of discourse out of which it is constructed.

The ideological project of this story is that of national unity, unity

between the *asimilaos* and the islanders, for, though she might deny it, Suzie Bermudez is, in the final analysis, a Puerto Rican just like the island puertorriqueños who are Ana Lydia Vega's ideal readers. Indeed, the tension of the story and its humor come from her conscious denial of that identity. In a humorous application of the Freudian concept of the "return of the repressed," Suzie blurts out "Viva Puerto Rico Libre" while in the throes of an intrauterine orgasm at the end of the story. So, scratch any Puerto Rican or, better yet, take her to bed, and before long you'll see we're all *independentistas* under the skin, or under the split subject's conscious mind.

Suzie Bermudez, a Nuyoricana, returns to Puerto Rico on vacation. Her desire is shaped in the dimension of images, and her reference point there is the romantic couple depicted in the Commonwealth government's travel poster she saw in the lobby of the building where she works. She wants to put herself into that picture. But as soon as her plane lands, she is assaulted by a "vociferante crowd disfrazada de colores aullantes y coronada por kilómetros de hair curlers" (76). That is, the reality she is faced with in no way corresponds to the idealized image that had informed her notion of contemporary Puerto Rico.

Now this speaking voice is that of the narrator, but it is inflected with the emotional structure of the character. As readers, we do not quite know when the fictive narrator agrees with Suzie's assessments and when s/he is being ironic, that is, implicitly criticizing her views. In this dialogic text, each utterance opens up a space for a critical or ironic reading of the parodized speech presented. The text's irony is structured around Suzie's "impure" monologue, for her utterances are caricatures of a colonized discourse known to islanders as that of the *pitiyanqui*. The play of language makes the text a kind of burlesque or low comedy on the theme of linguistic and cultural assimilation. Since both the implied author and reader know more and understand more than does the character, the text is a joke on Suzie Bermudez. Her utterances are implicitly counterposed to the possible responses of an implied reader, one who can laugh at the character's blindness.

First, as the spelling of her name indicates, she pronounces it following English phonology: Bermiudez, so Suzie has assimilated that. Second, she has assimilated the negative attitudes of the North Americans who, like her boss, wonder why Spiks don't just stay home in Puerto Rico. But poor Suzie consciously rejects all things Puerto Rican and when faced with that loud, brightly clad crowd, her impulse is to escape. She thinks of taking refuge in her grandmother, who lives in, of all places, Lares. This town was the locus of Puerto Rico's aborted attempt to get

national independence in 1868 and is now the symbol of the national independence movement. As stated, the ideological project or theme of the story is national unity between Nuyoricans *malgré lui* and island Puerto Ricans, but the story's movement toward that end is not smooth or uninterrupted. It is everywhere inscribed with hesitancy, gaps and contradiction. Suzie's impulse is towards Lares but, on second thought, she remembers her reservations at the well-named Conquistador Hotel, with its acres of manicured golf courses occupying what would otherwise be prime arable land, and decides to keep her reservations, symbolically allying herself with the conquerors but also refusing her grandmother's racism, for she remembers that her grandmother could not stand her father because of his kinky hair. Suzie, we are to understand, rejects that system of racial bigotry based on an elaborate differentiation of somatic features which is the peculiarly Puerto Rican brand of racism. The Puerto Rico of *tierra adentro* is not without its problems either.

This story is constructed out of a large structural irony: Suzie Bermudez is the ~~native~~ ^{naïve} heroine whose voice speaks the text. But her parodized speech is also that of the narrator; it is at least a double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, 269). One of the voices is that of someone suspended between two cultural poles: North American attitudes toward Puerto Ricans (her conscious attitude), and a repressed idea of nationality that speaks through her denial and her repulsion (her unconscious). This other voice is a whole cultural context, a collective history of which she is a part despite herself. It is a history that speaks against her denial. It is repressed material which has its own logic, its own language. It presses for recognition; witness her first impulse to seek comfort in her grandmother, a figure who represents her connection to a familial past just as Lares is metonymic for all of Puerto Rico.

The language of the story is a stylized version of what is commonly known as Spanglish and what linguists refer to as Spanish-English code-switching.⁸ Heteroglossia is introduced into the story not only by means of this stylization, but also by the double-voiced ironic discourse of the narrator.⁹ The voice of Suzie Bermudez is always mediated, quoted as it were, by the narrator, although there are no syntactic markers to indicate this. The text is a mix of two national languages, English and Spanish, by means of which we hear the voice of Suzie Bermudez' internal speech via quasi-direct authorial discourse. This narrative voice vacillates: sometimes it is one with the point of view represented by Suzie Bermudez, sometimes it is busy exposing the inadequacy of her speech to its object.

The author also incorporates the internal stratification of Puerto Rican Spanish by having the narrator's voice at times use the expressions and

references of an educated speaker, as when the character sees herself falling into a "sweaty, smelly, streetcar named desire," and at other times having her fictive narrator use loanblends such as "jangueadores."

If we were to ask "who speaks?," we would have to answer: the fictive narrator. But Suzie's emotional apparatus informs this speech. If we ask "what is left out?," we would have to answer: Suzie's sexuality as seen by the same voice that has been telling the story. It is what happens in the ellipsis between the end of the story and its beginning, a space not encoded by the text as spoken.

One of the gaps of this story is its inability to linguistically encode Suzie Bermudez' sexuality despite the way in which her desire is inscribed throughout the story. I would argue that the reason for this inability is that the double-voiced parodic discourse of the narrator cannot encompass that sexuality in that voice, so the text must shift to another, dramatized voice in order to tell that part of the story. There is formal difficulty here that is resolved by having a male character within the story tell the "best part."

As stated, Suzie wants to become part of that poster image, preferably with a red-blooded North American like her boss. She wants to avoid what she sees as the fate of the Puerto Rican woman who is foolish enough to stay on the island, and even foolish enough to marry a Puerto Rican man. She thinks that if her mother had not had the brilliant idea of emigrating to the states, her fate would have been to marry "algún drunken bastard de billar, de esos que nacen con la caneca incrustada en la mano y encierran la fat ugly housewife en la casa con diez screaming kids entre los cellulitic muslos mientras ellos hacen pretty body y le aplanan la calle a cualquier shameless bitch" (76).

In Bakhtinian terms, this is an example of the author's oscillating relationship to a common view; sometimes she exaggerates one or another aspect of "common language" and sometimes she becomes one with it (302). We recognize the image of the drunken husband with a billiard cue permanently encrusted in his hand from another story by the author and Carmen Lugo Filippi, "Cuatro selecciones por una peseta," so that this is not purely Suzie's voice, but is at times the author's as well.

Suzie's desire makes her reject her Puerto Rican identity as she strives to attain whiteness and all-American status. As soon as she reaches her hotel room she puts on a sexy polka dot bikini. "Se pasó un peine por los cabellos teñidos de Wild Auburn y desrizados con Curl-free, se pintó los labios de Bicentennial Red para acentuar la blancura de los dientes y se frotó una gota de Evening in the South Seas detrás de cada oreja" (77). In short, she turns her visit to Puerto Rico into an erotic/exotic adventure as she erases, removes, the very same sign, curly hair, that had made her

grandmother reject her father. This same, culturally coded curly hair appears later as the bartender's afro.

Her "exciting sueño de breathtaking poster" is ultimately "aborted" as the realities of island life continue to assault her senses. She suffers a "down" when she discovers the hotel's cable cars are out of order. Hence, the breakdowns, power failures and strikes (everyday life in the colony) contrasts sharply with the glossy Madison Avenue image that informs Suzie's desire. But she is still in search of that image.

At poolside she tastes a piña colada for the first time and compares it favorably to the drinks she remembers from childhood—*maví* and *guarapo*, drinks which are coded for rural, agricultural: "ella pertenecía a la generación del maví y el guarapo que no era precisamente what she would call sus typical drinks favoritos" (77). Again, the joke is on Suzie. She is unaware of such sophisticated drinks because she belongs to that part of the emigrant generation that drank *maví*, the rural proletariat. The joke has class connotations and reflects the town/country dichotomy. But it is a joke only for the enjoyment of island Puerto Ricans, and despite the text's conscious project of national unity, Nuyoricans are not included in the joke except as its objects.

The alcohol puts her in touch with her erotic yearnings and, having finished the bestseller in which a white protagonist is raped by a Haitian in a "primitive voodoo rite"—yet another sign of her alienation from her Antillean past—Suzie inspects the "native specimens" she had earlier refused to consider. The bartender returns her glances; his looks are "one way elevators moving towards more fertile and lush stopping places." Although she runs to her room, she cannot resist her drives and telephones the bartender. Here the narrative voice switches and we learn what happens next from the bartender and his cronies:

Entonces el admirado mamitólogo narró como en el preciso instante en que las platinum-frosted fingernails se incrustaban passionately en su afro, desde los skyscrapers inalcanzables de un intrauterine orgasm, los half-opened lips de Suzie Bermudez producían el sonomugido ancestral de: VIVA PUELTO RICO LIBREEEEE! (79)

The explosion of the political slogan erupts—a return of the repressed—from Suzie Bermudez' lips. The sexual and the political are elided. The laughter at the end, the reader's pleasure, comes from the literal undermining of Suzie's self-hating discourse by another voice, one which has been denied entry into the text as spoken. It is the voice that has been refused, the other side of Suzie as we've known her so far. The repressed material that bursts forth at the end is that identity—pro-independence Puerto Rican—which Suzie has rejected throughout the nar-

rative. The reader remembers that, on her way to the hotel, she had approvingly noted Puerto Rico's transformation, its industrialization: "Y todavía esos filthy, no-good Communist terrorists se atrevían a hablar de independencia. A ella sí que no le iban hacer swallow esa crap" (77). It is this material, her repressed *Other*, that returns at the end of the narrative. But it returns via the mediation of the bartender's voice.

The ending is open to several readings. One is that, on having an orgasm and being beyond the realm of the rational, she attains the sexual and national identity, as well as the authenticity she lacked. The national and the sexual are here conflated with the "natural." It follows logically from this that the Puerto Rican male, who earlier was the object of her disdain, is, by means of this textual move, the agent of her national and sexual integration.

The story ends in laughter and laughter cannot be encoded into any logical language, but the ending manifests a structural impossibility or contradiction. The author does not approve of the bartender any more than she does of Suzie—he is an "admirado mamitólogo" and his buddies are "aspirantes a tumbagringas." In another story "Letra para salsa . . .," Ana Lydia Vega parodizes this very locker-room style, buddy sharing system.

But the parodic voice which has told the story so far must exit just when the story is most interesting. It is incapable of telling that part of it and must allow another, more single-voiced character to take it from there. The collapsing of the sexual into the national must come from a voice which, to quote a Puerto Rican (rural) saying: "tiene los pantalones bien amarraos."

As stated, what is left out or elided into the cultural, or national, is the sexual. Suzie's sexuality is shifted, put into the discourse of another. We never find out what happened to Suzie between the time she utters that "Viva Puerto Rico Libre" and the time she enters her office to tell her boss she had a wonderful time—the beginning of the story.

Why does the narrator give up the stage to another? One reason might be that the genre, short story, involving as it does an inexorable movement towards an ending,¹⁰ requires a structural solution to Suzie's search. Given her linguistic ambivalence and her harsh judgement of her compatriots, the utterance at the end must be, one, the strongest possible resolution to that ambivalence and, two, a kind of revenge on the part of someone (or some idea) which has been the object of her disdain. This is, in short, a revenge narrative.

If the human subject can only conceptualize itself when it is mirrored back to itself from the position of another's desire, Suzie's utterance

is to be understood as, in some way, the desire of the reader inscribed at the moment of her/his reading (Lacan, 6). We know that *Virgenes y Mártires* has enjoyed record-breaking sales, a popularity which one of its authors, Carmen Lugo Filippi, explains by saying she thinks the women who buy the book wish they had written it. It is the book the contemporary Puerto Rican woman wishes she had written.¹¹ In the case of this story, at least, that wish might well be the expression of a deeply felt resentment to a generation of Puerto Ricans who put into question the much fought for cultural and national identity of that island colony. The Nuyoricans are, in a certain sense, the islanders' *Other*, and the text's conscious project of an overarching national identity is undermined as it takes literary form. It too, like Suzie, like the reader, is a house divided against itself.

¹Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (Methuen, N.J.: Methuen Press, 1980), 135, 109. I wish to thank the University of Iowa and Brown University's Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women for the fellowship support which made research for this article possible.

²Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

³Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist, trans. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 277.

⁴Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), especially "The Signification of the Phallus," 281 ff., and "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I," 1-7.

⁵Ana Lydia Vega, "Pollito Chicken," *Virgenes y Mártires*, (Río Piedras: Editorial Antillana, 1981), 73-79.

⁶The lyrics are "Pollito-Chicken, Gallina-Hen, Lápiz-Pencil y Pluma-Pen . . ." The language policy of the colonial government, in effect on and off for almost forty years, was to make Spanish/English bilinguals of Puerto Ricans by means of forced teaching of English in the elementary schools.

⁷Juan Flores, "Qué Assimilated, Brother, Yo Soy Asimilao: The Structuring of Puerto Rican Identity in the U.S.," a paper presented at the University of Florida, Gainesville's February, 1984 conference, "Popular Culture, National Identity and Migration in the Caribbean," published as "'Qué assimilated, brother, you soy asimilao': la estructuración de la identidad puertorriqueña en los Estados Unidos," *Casa de las Américas* 16:152 (1985), 54-63.

⁸Shana Poplack's work (among others) on code-switching patterns among Spanish-English bilinguals has shown it to be normative, i.e. rule-governed behavior of a highly sophisticated kind. It requires control of the surface grammars of two languages and constitutes a mapping of two codes without the violation of surface grammar rules. See Shana Poplack, "'Sometimes I'll Start a Sentence in Spanish y termino en español': Toward a Typology of Code-Switching." *Language*

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⁹"Heteroglossia," for Bakhtin, is "the base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. (. . .) it is that which a systematic linguistics must always suppress," 428.

¹⁰According to Boris Eichenbaum, the short story "amasses its whole weight towards the ending. Like a bomb dropped from an airplane, it must speed downwards so as to strike with its warhead full force on the target." Boris Eichenbaum, *O Henry and the Theory of the Short Story*, trans. I.R. Titunik (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Contributions, University of Michigan, 1968), 4.

¹¹Interview, Albany, N.Y. April, 1985.