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Making the Invisible, Visible: The Body and the Nation in Laura Ruiz Montes' *A Ciegas*  
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In her essay “Los usos del eros en el Caribe” Puerto Rican writer Mayra Santos-Febres contends that the erotic has served as a discursive strategy in Caribbean literature for quite some time. She argues, in fact, that the erotic has often served as a gateway for ongoing discussions on Caribbean identity (87). Indeed, for Santos-Febres the presence of the body in Caribbean literature tends to signal another space of literary contention and negotiation, one which defines the body as the border between the social and the intimate (89). She adds, in fact, that writing about (or through) the body, points to the existence of two types of knowledge, inner knowledge, as well as the knowledge of how societal power responds to the presence of that very body. She concludes, therefore, that the incorporation of the body in contemporary Caribbean literature responds to a necessity to name *difference* and the existence of logic, histories, experiences and sexualities distinct from those permitted and registered by official discourse (90).

This study analyzes *A Ciegas*, a one-act play by the Cuban writer Laura Ruiz Montes (Matanzas, 1966). In this work, Ruiz Montes relies upon both the erotic (specifically the female body) and the supernatural, to underscore the complex nature of gender and sexuality within Cuba's national history. In *A Ciegas*, the female body and female sexuality appear in the shadows, ‘invisible’ within the nation. Ruiz Montes juxtaposes present and past, realism and the supernatural, and heterosexual and homosexual desire in order to elucidate the various forms of *difference* that remain outside official national discourses.

**The Special Period, los Novísimos and Laura Ruiz Montes**

Published in 2005, Ruiz Montes' play is set and must be understood within the context of Cuba's *Special Period*. Although from the outset revolutionary Cuba struggled economically, its biggest financial crisis came about in 1993, following the fall of the Soviet Union. Almost overnight, the Caribbean island, which had received aid from the former world power since the early 1960s, saw itself immersed in what Fidel Castro labeled a "special period during peacetime." In the introduction to *Cuba in the Special Period: Culture and Ideology in the 1990s*, Ariana Hernandez-Reguant describes this time period as intense for all those who suffered through it, yet one that "was construed as a time of waiting; as an irresolute transition" (2). Characterized by acute food and energy shortages, including continual power and water outages, Cuba's literary and art movements were especially hard hit during the 1990s when paper and art supplies virtually disappeared. Nevertheless, these shortages led writers and artists to look for diverse ways to publish and produce art. Thus, rather than deterring art and literary production, the economic crisis gave way to new writers and artists determined to produce even under the most precarious situations.

In the midst of this severe economic crisis, a new literary group emerged on the island, *Los novísimos*. The term, coined by Salvador Redonet in the introduction of the literary anthology, *Los últimos serán los primeros*, describes the generation of writers born after the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s. This generation traces its origins to 1984, the year that the "Seis del Ochenta" literary group emerged in the city of Santiago. "Seis del Ochenta" was the first literary group to tackle such taboo subjects as flaws in Cuba's educational system, injustices within the military, sexism and homophobia within revolutionary society, as well as offered "other views" on the Angola

War in their works (Rosales Rosa). What is significant about the writers belonging to *los novísimos* is that they began their literary careers in the 1980s, and matured precisely during Cuba's Special Period. The crisis forced them to rely on alternative means to publish, either by turning to foreign presses when possible, or by creating 'plaquettes' and handmade artistic books, such as those produced by *Ediciones Vigía* in Matanzas, Cuba.

Laura Ruiz Montes belongs precisely to the generation of *los novísimos*. Poet, playwright, and essayist, Ruiz Montes studied History at the University of Matanzas and has been the editor of *Ediciones Vigía* since 1989. She is also the editor of the online magazine, *Mar Desnudo: Revista de Arte y Cultura Cubana*. She has published both in Cuba and abroad, and her well-known works of poetry include *Queda escrito* (1988), *La sombra de otros* (1994), *Esperando a un príncipe* (1995), *Lo que fue la ciudad de mis sueños* (2000), *El camino sobre las aguas* (2004), *A qué país volver* (2007) and the most recent, *Los frutos ácidos* (2008). Her literary awards include the Bonifacio Byrne poetry prize (1985), the Nestor Ulloa Prize (1985), the Pinos Nuevos Prize (1996), and the Hermanos Loynaz Award for a children's novel (2004).

In his prologue to *Lo que fue la ciudad de mis sueños: Poesía reunida 1988-1996*, which anthologizes Ruiz Montes' poetry, fellow poet and narrator Abilio Estévez explains that the text is one that "se inserta en la historia de una nación dolorida, en un tiempo doloroso. En él, la autora no intenta huir de la realidad, más bien la enfrenta y enmascara con eficaz ensalmo" [inserts itself in the history of a nation in pain, during a time of pain. In it the author doesn't attempt to run from reality, but rather faces it and masks it efficiently as if by magic] (*Obra poética*). For Ruiz Montes, poetry, history and

life are inexorably tied. In an interview with Marilyn Bobes she states: “La poesía para mí es una urgencia, la salida que más me auxilia cuando necesito decir lo que callo, sin tener que hablar apenas. Es la posibilidad, a la vez, de lanzar el grito y de hablar en un susurro. Es una senda de doble vía: la salida y la entrada del dolor y la reflexión.” [For me, poetry is an urgency, a way out that helps me when I need to say what I keep quiet, by barely having to speak. At the same time, it’s the possibility of sending a scream and speaking in a whisper. It’s a two-way road: the exit and entry of pain and reflection] (Bobes).

*A Ciegas* is Ruiz Montes’ first incursion into theatre. In her interview with Bobes, she reveals that her interest in this genre began during her adolescence. Yet her desire to write this play came on rather suddenly one night. Ruiz Montes, in fact, appears to resist describing herself as a playwright. In fact, she calls *A Ciegas* a dramatic poem (*un poema dramático*) and maintains that although she’s unsure as to whether or not the work is good or bad, she’s pleased to have been capable of writing it as others before her have (Bobes). Generally well received, *A Ciegas* obtained the José Jacinto Theatre Prize in 2003. As of yet, however, the play has not been staged, though it is currently under review by the Cuban theater group, Korimacao (Email Interview). Since the publication of *A Ciegas*, Ruiz Montes has continued writing drama, including a monologue on Tina Modotti titled *Tinísima en azul Prusia*, and she is preparing another play titled *Lluvia dorada, lluvia negra* (Ibid).

### *A Ciegas...*

Set in a small room, in a popular neighborhood, or *un solar*, during a power outage, *A Ciegas* centers on Ana, a woman in her mid-thirties who secretly waits for her

lover, Amalia, to arrive as their relationship is deemed unacceptable. During the long wait, she is startled by the appearance of a ghostly figure, aptly named Sombra. This figure shares both the same space with Ana as well as bears the name of her lover, Amalia. Sombra, whose real name is Amalia Simoni, is the wife of nineteenth-century Cuban War of Independence hero, Ignacio Agramonte. And like Ana, Sombra awaits her lover's return, albeit from war (and death). In the darkness, Ana and Sombra enter into a spirited dialogue on love, female sexuality, their multiple frustrations, and the desperation of waiting (*la espera*), not just for the arrival of their respective lovers, but for changes within their own societies (late nineteenth and late twentieth-century Cuba). Although Cuba is not directly mentioned in the play, there are numerous references to Cuban history and culture, including its music and literature.

As Ruiz Montes herself explains in an email interview, the role of history in this play is deliberate. The author, with an academic background in history, finds the inclusion of history essential to her work but in this work even more so: “intenté insertar dentro de la historia de Cuba- desde la ficción, por supuesto—a estas mujeres que también están en la historia y en la vida diaria. ... Intenté mostrar mujeres actuales que en la obra se llaman Ana y Amalia, en homenaje a estas mujeres tremendas de la Historia de Cuba que fueron Ana Betancourt y Amalia Simoni” [I tried to insert, through fiction, of course, these women who are a part of history and daily life, into the history of Cuba... I tried to show contemporary women, named Ana and Amalia in this play, in honor of Ana Betancourt and Amalia Simoni, those remarkable women in Cuban History]. More importantly, she adds that rather than a simple comparison, “creé a la Ana y a la Amalia de hoy como una suerte de continuidad de aquellas. Aquellas que fueron heroínas en su

tiempo, estas lo son en este otro tiempo/espacio...” [I created today’s Ana and Amalia as a sort of continuity of those (from the past). They were heroines in their time, these are as well in this other time/space] (Email Interview).

Though the work is centered in the present, there are constant references to the past. By means of monologues and dialogues, the play highlights the fear, invisibility, and complicity of women within the (Cuban) nation. Whereas Ana’s discourse refers to the struggles she and her lover face within contemporary society, the ghostlike figure of Sombra discusses the various difficulties present in nineteenth-century, revolutionary Cuban society, including her separation from her husband during war. And despite the obvious differences between the two women, Ana and Sombra forge a common bond that points to a possible agency for women within the nation.

Fear and anxiousness persist throughout the work. The play begins with Ana opening the door of an empty, dark room waiting for her lover’s arrival. We discover that a friend has lent her the room so that she and Amalia could meet in private, given that their relationship is unacceptable to both their families and society. Ana is fearful of the dark but more so of the neighbors who may turn against them. For her: “los vecinos son el enemigo. Los vecinos vigilan. Donde quiera que haya una casa sola, los vecinos vigilan” [...the neighbors are the enemy. The neighbors watch. Wherever there is a lonely house, the neighbors’ watch.]. (13). Barbara Creed in her study on lesbianism within popular culture argues that woman’s body in itself signifies ‘the other.’ Quoting Kristeva, she states that the female body’s image is ‘manipulated, shaped, altered, stereotyped, to point to the dangers that threaten civilization from all sides.’ The lesbian body is also manipulated, but specifically with three stereotypes that cannot be easily

adapted to the body of the non-lesbian: the masculinized, animalistic and the narcissistic lesbian body. Creed's point: that these stereotypes stem from 'a deep-seated fear of female sexuality, [these stereotypes] refer explicitly to the lesbian body, and arise from the nature of the threat lesbianism offers to patriarchal heterosexual culture'" (Creed 112).

Ana fears her neighbors not only because of the harm they may cause her, but also because of what they will say and how they will stereotype her. Her wait, *la espera*, is both for Amalia, and in a larger sense for a change in society that will allow her to be open about her sexuality. She describes her fears and those of her lover, "Tú tienes miedo. Yo también tengo miedo. Miedo a que cuando salgamos por esa puerta mañana, alguien nos haya espiado y se esconda para gritarnos: tortilleraaaaas. O cualquier otra cosa. Sí miedo a que crean que sólo somos eso" [You're afraid. I'm also afraid. I'm afraid that when we leave through those doors tomorrow, someone will have spied us and will be hiding to yell: dykes. Or something else. Yes, I'm afraid that they will think that that is all we are.] (15). Although the darkness gives Ana the chance to meet her lover Amalia in safety, it also renders her invisible within the nation due to her sexual orientation. Ana and her sexuality are doubly hidden, first because society does not deem it 'natural,' and thus a threat to public order which must be silenced and marginalized, and secondly because this outside 'marginalization' leads to a self-imposed one. Perhaps it is relevant to recall Judith Butler's contention in *Bodies that Matter* that "the forming of the subject requires an identification with the normative 'phantasm' of 'sex' and this identification takes place through a repudiation which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside, which is, after all, 'inside' the subject as its own founding repudiation" (3).

Scene two introduces the reader/spectator to the figure of Sombra, the ghost of nineteenth century heroine Amalia Simoni. This scene is a dialogue between Ana and Sombra. At first, Ana appears startled with Sombra's arrival, especially when Sombra declares that she is "Amalia." Through their dialogue, we discover that Sombra is more than a shadow, she is the spirit of a nineteenth century woman who has spent years "vagando, intentando hallar a alguien que me lea pero todos tienen prisa" [wandering, trying to find someone who will read for me but everyone is in a hurry] (22). She has spent her life and her *afterlife* waiting—waiting for messages and news from her husband gone to war. She has turned blind from so much waiting and what she now seeks is someone (from the present) to read and write letters on her behalf. She asks for Ana's help in writing Ignacio, her husband, "dile que estoy vieja y ciega y que a las viejas y a las ciegas la gente no las mira o las mira con lástima. Pero que así, vieja y ciega sigo esperando" [tell him that I'm old and blind and that people don't look at old women and the blind, and if they do, they do so with pity] (23). Like Ana, Sombra is also invisible. Her blindness, her age and more importantly her condition as a ghost or spirit, render her powerless. What's more, even Ana considers her crazy, yet another condition that alienates her from others. Like Ana, she is also marginalized. Although in truth her name appears in passing, with that of her war hero husband, in the nation's history books and encyclopedias, her current condition now renders her an abject figure, alienated from the national discourse.

Ruiz Montes' choice to include this historical figure in this work is significant for various reasons. Although not as well known as her husband, Ignacio Agramonte, Simoni was herself an important figure during Cuba's War of Independence. She belonged to the

upper classes and lived a privilege life up until her husband entered the rebel army. Married in 1868, Simoni spent her honeymoon on the battlefield. She then spent part of her early marriage in hiding at her parent's country home. Later Agramonte built a small country house, *El Idilio*, where they went to live and their first son was born. Though Agramonte spent much time in battle, he visited Amalia often. Eventually, she and her family were discovered and forced into exile, first to New York in 1871, where her daughter was born, and then to Merida, Mexico. Shortly after exile in Mexico, in 1873, she received news that Ignacio had been killed in battle (Cartaya Cotta).

Ruiz Montes explains that she chose Simoni because of her undying loyalty to and love for Agramonte. By choosing both Simoni and Ana as the play's main characters, Ruiz Montes seems to suggest that women like her still exist, even if their undying loyalty may not be necessarily to a man, but rather to a woman. Amalia Simoni's love for Ignacio is as valid as Ana's love for Amalia. Equally important is Ruiz Montes' choice to present Simoni as a 'sombra' or ghostly shadow. Not only does it indicate her invisibility within the nation, as I suggested before, but also it points to the use of the fantastic in the play as a way of indicating 'the possible,' allowing for possible agency. As Judith Butler explains in *Undoing Gender*, "to posit possibilities beyond the norm or, indeed, a different future for the norm itself, is part of the work of fantasy when we understand that it is not always constrained by the body as it is" (Butler 28) She goes on to suggest that fantasy is "part of the articulation of the possible, it moves beyond what is merely actual and present into a realm of possibility, the not yet actualized or the not actualizable" (28).

Tired of waiting, Ana briefly abandons the dark house in search of her lover, allowing Sombra to initiate her own monologue in scene three. Ana's exit stems from her

fear of Sombra, not only due to the latter's phantasmagoric condition, but more importantly because of her ambivalent position within society. In a sense Ana is in denial, refusing to acknowledge her own ambivalence in society and negating her own invisibility. What could she possibly have in common with a dead, heterosexual elderly woman? After all, Sombra, the ghost of Amalia Simoni, belongs to nineteenth century patriarchal Cuba, a period of the nation's formation. Yet, as the play contends, these women, despite their apparent differences, have a great deal in common. They appear hidden to the outside world. Each in their way struggle not only for a space from which to speak but someone with whom to speak and who will listen.

### ***Sombra's monologue***

If Ana's initial monologue focused on her relationship with her lover, Amalia, and society's rejection of it, Sombra's centers on her relationship with Ignacio. Her monologue beckons Ignacio's return, her desire to see him again, feel his body close to hers. She refers to her invisibility, her lack of 'body' as a result of the waiting. "No sé que edad tengo pero sé que llevo siglos esperándote. Tampoco sé cómo está mi piel. No he envejecido ni se han hecho pliegues en mi vientre. Lo sé porque aún me siento tersa cuando me acaricio en las noches en que más te echo de menos. Lo sé pero no lo veo. No veo mi piel. Estoy ciega. No existo pero existo. No soy porque no puedo ver ni me ven pero sí soy porque te espero" [I don't know how old I am but I know that I've spent centuries waiting for you. I also don't know what my skin looks like. I haven't aged nor do I have pleats in my belly. I know because I feel smooth when I caress myself in the night, when I miss you the most. I know but I don't see it. I can't see my skin. I'm blind.

I exist but I don't exit. I'm not because I can't see and others can't see me, but I am because I wait for you] (30).

The play then counterpoints Ana's lesbian desire with Sombra's heterosexual one. If today Ana must hide behind close doors to foment her relationship with Amalia, in the nineteenth century women such as Sombra/Amalia Simoni also had to keep up appearances. Much of Simoni's life was in hiding due to her husband's position in the rebel army. But also as the historian, Teresa Prados-Torreira explains, nineteenth century women's lives were organized around guarding their reputation and honor. "The most important lesson they learned was to fear public opinion and to respect conventions" (Prados-Torreira 13). In fact, proper women never ventured out in public alone, they were to be escorted at all times by male relatives (13-14).

By scene four, Ana has returned and she and Sombra engage in true dialogue on their alienated condition and their relationships to finally forge an unusual bond. At one point, while discussing their romantic relationships, they hear the voices of strangers. Ana remains fearful but Sombra tells her not to be afraid: "Todo está bien. Vamos a esperar más" [Everything is well. Let's wait longer] (40). Ana agrees to help her, claiming that it will help the time go faster. In a sense, both figures begin by displaying a sort of mutual antagonism and distrust and grow into a complicit relationship. Although Ana does not think that Sombra could possibly understand her love for Amalia, not only because she is a heterosexual woman but because she is from the nineteenth century, she is surprised to hear Sombra say: "¿Y qué? ¿A qué tanto ruido? Tú te crees que eso se inventó ahora? ¡Pero qué tonta eres! Hace siglos que las mujeres se besan se manosean a escondidas. No hay nada nuevo bajo el sol. ¿Y a mí qué? Que hagan lo que quieran. Yo

no las molesto ni a mí me molesta. Yo he vivido varios siglos y si te contara todo lo que he visto. Pero déjame a mi esperando a Ignacio” [And so what? Why all the fuss? You think this was just invented? You are so foolish! Women have been kissing and touching each other in secret for centuries. Nothing new under the sun! And what do I care! They can do what they want. I don’t bother them and they don’t bother me. I’ve lived several centuries and if only I were to tell you all that I’ve seen. But never mind. Leave me alone waiting for Ignacio] (49).

Sombra, the ghostly figure of Amalia Simoni, goes on to discuss her desire and love for Ignacio. As she describes him, Ana describes Amalia and the two engage in a counterpoint of heterosexual and homosexual desire. At the end, Sombra tells Ana, “No me llames Sombra, yo soy Amalia. ¿Y tú, cómo te llamas?” [Don’t call me Sombra. I’m Amalia. And you, what is your name?] (51). They are finally made visible to one another though they remain in the shadows of society. As Sombra states, “también estás anclada en la ciénaga. Esperar es quedar anclado. Después está la diferencia de las aguas. Hay quien se queda anclado en el mar, hay quien en el río y hay quien en la ciénaga. Estamos igual, ancladas. Tú, anclada como una sombra” [...you are also anchored, in the swamp. To wait is to be anchored. Then there is a difference with the waters. Some say anchored at sea, some in the river and some in the swamp. We’re the same, anchored. You, anchored like a shadow] (54). Ana and Sombra, this unlikely pair, remain in the shadows for their conditions within society. Ana as a result of her sexual orientation within a patriarchal, heterosexist society and Sombra, as a result of her past condition as woman in nineteenth-century Cuba as well as her current condition as a wandering, blind ghost.

In conclusion, at the end of scene five, Sombra leaves Ana in darkness, and in the final moments Ana, fearful of being abandoned by her Amalia, enters into a desperate monologue, even asking Sombra to return. *A Ciegas* ends without a clear resolution, yet by means of their ongoing dialogue, Ana and Sombra are made visible to each other as well as to the reader/spectator. Through their dialogues, Ana and Sombra attempt to forge a space of their own within the nation's public discourse. The play concludes with a knock on the door and the lights suddenly turning on. In the end, however, the question remains as to whether either woman Ana, or the spirit Sombra, will step out of the darkness to become fully visible in the public (national) sphere.

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