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## ALLOTROPES

### The Short Stories Of Ángela Hernández Núñez

by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert

Ah, words, flashes of lightning that weave labyrinths.  
—Ángela Hernández

*Allotropes*—the existence of a substance or element in two or more different forms—is more than just the title of Dominican writer Ángela Hernández Núñez’s first collection of short stories, published in 1989. These myriad crystalline forms, which Hernández, a chemical engineer by training, understands better than most, epitomize a creative process deeply rooted in a “quite peculiar” childhood in the village of Jarabacoa, high on the verdant mountains of the central *sierra* of the island of Hispaniola. There she grew up “amidst a great deal of economic hardship, even hunger,” but sustained by a “realm of liberty” that nourished her creativity—a pristine world of singing birds, trees laden with wild fruit, baths in the crystalline waters of the nearby stream where she learned the true meaning of innocence, “that feeling of being one with everything, that anything one imagines is possible, a constant speculation about the world and the things that are beyond the limits of one’s vision,” where she could “breathe with all the things: with the earth, with the water, with the plants,” feeling a “certain intimacy with all things” (see Carolina González’s interview with Hernández in this issue of *Callaloo*).

The edenic world of Jarabacoa—lovingly recreated in stories like “Teresea Irene,” “How to Gather the Shadows of the Flowers,” “Gnawing on a Rose,” and “Telegram”—remains for Hernández the *locus amoenus* that anchors her fiction. Through the prism of Jarabacoa’s primeval translucence all subsequent experiences—political activity, an aborted career in the sciences, motherhood (she has four children), feminist activism, and writing—are filtered. She is wont to describe her being wrenched away from the world of her childhood as an uprooting that completely tore her away from everything that had meaning in her life. Her stories, as a result, are marked by a strong yearning to return to the place of origin.

I think underneath all creation there is some level of unconformity with reality (she tells Carolina González). That is what drives one to create, to make the beauty one has lost jell in another space. It is also driven by the desire to reestablish that lost

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innocence, that intimacy with all things, that breathing with all things, that singular and universal feeling, where death does not matter because you are accompanied by everything, solitude does not matter because you are never alone, because you are accompanied by everything around you.

If the world of Jarabacoa spurred Hernández towards the “adventure of creation,” it was the adventure of political and feminist activism which monopolized her energies until the mid-1980s. She entered the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo in the politicized 1970s and joined its leftist student movement, finding in its solidarity and camaraderie a salve to heal her uprootedness and “instinctive uncomformities.” Disappointed by politics and politicians, she turned to grassroots feminism and literature. In 1985 she would publish the appropriately named *Desafío* [Challenge], her first collection of poetry (a book she claims she wrote to keep from killing herself), together with a series of feminist essays, *Diez prejuicios sobre el feminismo* [Ten Prejudices Against Feminism], *¿Por qué luchan las mujeres?* [What Do Women Struggle For?], *Para leer, ¿Por qué luchan las mujeres?* [How To Read, What Do Women Struggle For?], and *Machismo y aborto* [Machismo and Abortion]. These would be followed in 1986 by her seminal study of women and education in the Dominican Republic, *Emergencia del silencio* [Emerging From Silence] and the co-authored *Campesinas y políticos, 1986: lo que las campesinas creen de los y políticos lo que políticos les ofrecen* [Peasant Women and Politicians, 1986: What Peasant Women Think of Politicians and What Politicians Offer Them].

As if these essays and treatises on women in the Dominican Republic had been the crucible that purified the word, exorcising away a burning need to wield it as a weapon, Hernández’s writing emerges from them purged of its anger, armed instead with remarkable poetic richness, set to give wings to what will become her characteristic blending of the vivid details of the external world with a poet’s understanding of the fantastic world of the imagination.

Her literary career, born in 1985 with the publication of *Desafío*, would blossom in 1988. In 1987 she had published a series of articles in a Santo Domingo newspaper, *El Sol*, embryonic tales she had meant as consciousness-raising vignettes, but which became her first collection of prose, *Las mariposas no temen a los cactus* [Butterflies Are Not Afraid of Cacti], published in 1988. In the protostories of *Las mariposas . . .*—case studies on abortion, battering, paternal responsibilities, culled from incidents familiar to her—Hernández’s creativity, in her own words, “started leaking through.” “Real-life stories” they may have been, but they emerge in the telling as embryonic literary tales, with deeply-etched characters moving awkwardly between their aspirations (however modest) and a world out of tune with (when not openly hostile to) their dreams.

The disharmony—between a lush internal world where dreams and passions lurk and the mundane terrain of everydayness of which the texts of *Las mariposas . . .* hint—finds its fruition in “Cómo recoger la sombra de las flores” [“How to Gather the Shadows of the Flowers”], the first of Hernández’s short stories, which won her the

1988 Casa del Teatro Literary Prize. By the time she published her second collection of short stories, *Masticar una rosa* [Gnawing On a Rose] in 1993, mediated by two collections of poems, *Tizne y cristal* (1987) and *Edades de asombro* (1990), her standing as the foremost Dominican writer of her generation was assured.

Hernández's prize-winning story "How to Gather the Shadows of the Flowers" became the seminal text of *Alótropos*, which appeared to critical acclaim in 1989. With *Alótropos*, Marcio Veloz Maggiolo would declare, Ángela Hernández Núñez had reached a summit in Dominican writing; these stories, by a writer virtually unknown till 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." They were nourished, above all, by a thrust to unveil what lies behind the worldly, terrestrial, and commonplace, to capture what eludes comprehension, what abides beyond the frontiers of the prosaic. They were nurtured, in short, by the magical world of Jarabacoa, to which Hernández returns as a place of origin and magic, surreal in its beauty, the repository of mystery and enchantment. In her prologue to *Alótropos* Hernández would write of Jarabacoa that it is there where Caribbean nature "exhibits its plurality and reconcentrates its imagination":

Magic is the sole word that can precisely define its beauty, its essence and aromas. There the undulations of the earth create sea-like mirages, imitating fantastic swells hidden at dawn by a veil of indigo mist. The greens rise and descend, making visual monotony impossible; the hamlets spill the sparkle of their poor habitations concealed behind their blues, pinks, and violent yellows; the hills of segregated trees emerge as a patchwork of calico; here a clump of green pines streaks the landscape; there the roseapples tint a stream with olive green, the clusters of *grayumbos* display their white stains, and the pitch-apples tilt over to refract the light. There is no uniformity of sound: crickets, nightingales, the wind, owls, the gurgle of the stream, the harvest songs impose themselves upon modern noises, over memory, their allure rising in harmony, without contradiction, without confusion.

Jarabacoa is, in *Alótropos*, more than the magical place of nostalgic return; it is also the source of characters and tales. The mad eldest daughter of Marina Cáceres emerges, filtered through art, in the pages of "Teresa Irene." The touching beauty of the mad Isabel Mariana, found by the villagers "alone, naked, dead, her head surrounded by the flower of her dark mane floating downstream," is transformed in *Alótropos* into the beautiful, waif-like young girl trapped by the rainbow, at last happy and fulfilled in her underwater grave. The mundane life of Jarabacoa, its characters, dramas, and tragedies, merges in these 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 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], published in 1993, 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 *barbados* ('the bearded ones')." Jarabacoa's "pure images of untouchable beauty" stalk Hernández, its people haunt her:

I felt my town siege me like an all-powerful being, transformed into a thousand eyes tracking my steps, scrutinizing my thoughts, restricting 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 dialects of their expectations. It does not matter. It tracks, it remembers, it imposes. The only valid thing is the codes of its immobility, of its rhythm, of the flow of its beauty and imprisonment, of its obstinacy to retain in the roots a complete possession.

There is in this affirmation of connection to a place of marvelous beauty and commonplace everydayness a certainty of belonging, an avowal of rootedness, that gives Ángela Hernández Núñez's 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 centeredness which constitutes the characters' protection against despair. Hernández's characters, like herself, always have a place to which they can return.