Abstract  In striking resonance with Doestoevsky’s Underground Man, the seminal antihero of the twentieth century, the male “antimodels” in Cristina Fernández Cubas’s 1990 anthology El ángulo del horror fail by deliberate strategy to live up to societal expectations and assumptions. The detached, self-absorbed and self-mocking personae in this collection are each the product of a kind of physical or emotional suffering that makes it impossible for them to be anything but self-serving in their attitudes and goals. Often narrating in first person, the images they create of themselves are deliberately ugly yet forthright, ironic, and curiously appealing. Together they embody the quintessential antihero, a leitmotiv with a rich history in the literature of Spain and elsewhere. In this way, they destabilize the traditional order of things and insist that we reconsider our society, ourselves. What’s more, they suggest another kind of ideal, another litmus test for what is “acceptable.” This opens up a whole realm of possibilities for all associated literary characters. Through their relationship with antiheroes, women characters manage to negotiate successfully a far wider range of roles, behaviors and circumstances than would otherwise have been sanctioned within societal boundaries.

Keywords Cristina Fernández Cubas . Antihero . Gender . Female agency . Female subjectivity . Short fiction . Spanish women writers and feminism . Spain

I not only did not manage to become nasty, but I did not manage to become anything at all; not nasty, not nice, not crooked, not honest, not a hero, not an insect. Now I am living out my life in my corner, taunting myself with the
spiteful and pointless consolation that an intelligent man cannot really become anything anyway—it takes a fool to become anything.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground.*

…ahora sé que era muy semejante a descender a los infiernos; que, sin proponérmelo, …mi propio aspecto, las terribles miasmas que surgían del baño, de la cocina, de la ropa hedionda amontonada en cualquier rincón de la casa, operaban como invocaciones a elementales, a incubos de la más baja estofa, a poderes de la peor categoría. Y ellos, los invocados, obedeciendo mis secretos mandatos, correteaban de aquí para allá, emborrachándome de delirio y de gozo, de vanidad y de soberbia. Todo esto lo supe de golpe. Supe lo que mi arte tenía de vil, rastrero, impresentable y bochornoso. Y comprendí también por qué después de aquellos trances me sentía renacido, puro…

Cristina Fernández Cubas. “*Helicón.*”

In Spain, where everyman views himself as superior, the only acceptable hero is revealed to be a vulgar anti-hero…

Elias L. Rivers, “*The Anti-Hero in Spain.*”

“[L]iteratura y feminismo no tienen nada que ver” once insisted Cristina Fernández Cubas (Arenys de mar, 1945—). What’s more, she declared, to categorize literary texts as such is akin to forcing them into “un corsé” that is, either a corset or a straightjacket or, depending on one’s personal experience with these implements of torture-in-the-name-of-fashion, both. And as for those authors who have the misfortune to be accused of feminism, woe betide them (Carmona 1991, p. 162). Such is the stated opinion of numerous contemporary women writers of Spain. Catherine Bellver attributes this aversion to two factors: the first being the Spanish tendency to associate feminism not with adherence to a widely held philosophy but rather with participation in specific organizations with sometimes militant and thus potentially alienating political agendas. The second factor involves what Bellver describes as the “miedo no confesado a coincidir con la percepción tradicional, que considera a la mujer que escribe como escritor insignificante con un público limitado de mujeres” (Bellver 2005, pp. 35–36). By distancing themselves from feminism, then, women authors such as Fernández Cubas, Mercedes Abad and Soledad Puértolas, to name but a few, seek to gain credibility in a wider, seemingly more professional cohort that is, again seemingly, free from restrictive connections with gender.

Be that as it may, when one considers Bellver’s broad definition of a feminist novel—to wit, one that focuses on “…el lugar de la mujer en la sociedad y en las dificultades con que ella se encuentra dentro de ese ambiente…” (Bellver 2005, p. 35)—there are connections with Spanish literature written by women that one is hard put to avoid. In the five short story anthologies, two novellas, and one play that Fernández Cubas herself has penned, for example, the lion’s share—indeed, some seventy percent—of protagonists happen to be women who confront and in various ways challenge the expectations placed upon them by Spain’s singular sociocultural-political framework. In light of this, that Fernández Cubas’s writings would be considered at the very least “women centered,” to borrow a phrase from Phyllis Zatlin, is hardly surprising (Zatlin 1995, p. 36).
The clear and by now well-studied focus on female subjects in Fernández Cubas’s works notwithstanding (Bretz; Folkart; Geoffrion-Vinci and Guarino; Zatlin “‘Amnesia, Strangulation, Hallucination and Other Mishaps: The Perils of Being Female in the Tales of Cristina Fernández Cubas’”), however, what intrigues me are those few male protagonists that do appear in her texts.\(^1\) In particular, while male main characters are sporadic in the majority of her short story collections, *El ángulo del horror* (1990), the third of these five anthologies, is populated almost entirely by male principals. The reverse is once again the case in the author’s subsequent anthologies, *Con Agatha en Estambul* (1994) and the autobiographical *Cosas que ya no existen* (2001). Given the stated gynocentric thematic orientation of Fernández Cubas’s complete oeuvre, then, to what might we attribute this fleeting, apparently phallocentric shift in *El ángulo del horror*?

A look at the protagonists in this collection reveals a number of common traits. Janet Pérez asserts that one of these is a shared sense of horror stemming from abjection, the Kristevan term for the process of individuation in which a child enters the masculine symbolic order by rejecting all that is not-I (Pérez 1995–1996, p. 160). In her elegant analysis of *El ángulo*…, Jessica Folkart demonstrates the crucial role of the gaze in this process (Folkart 2002, pp. 186–223). Robert Spires, founder of a whole school of Fernández Cubas scholars, holds that these characters each foreground the postmodern absurdity underlying social conventions, identity, and individual expectations and preconceptions (Spires 1995, p. 234).\(^2\)

In these detached, self-absorbed and self-mocking personae, I see something altogether different. They are each the product of a kind of physical or emotional suffering that makes it impossible for them to be anything but self-serving in their goals and attitudes. Often narrating in first person, the images they create of themselves are deliberately ugly yet forthright, ironic, and curiously appealing. To me, they speak of Lazarillo de Tormes, la Celestina, and a few centuries later, of Valle-Inclán’s Don Juan, Manuel Montenegro, and Cela’s Pascual Duarte. Crossing international boarders as Fernández Cubas has done so often in her widely traveled career, they resonate with Flaubert’s Félicité and especially with Dostoevsky’s Underground Man. Together they embody the quintessential antihero, a leitmotiv with a rich history in the literature of Spain and elsewhere. Whether unwitting or deliberate, the antihero is an iconoclast that forces us to take a long, hard look at society’s inconsistencies, its “strange loops” as Robert Spires and other postmodernists would have it (Spires 1995, p. 238). Moreover, this “antimodel” upsets the traditional order of things and insists that we reconsider our society, ourselves. Victor Brombert, in *In Praise of Antiheroes*, writes:

This may indeed be the principal significance of such antimodels, of their secret strengths and hidden victories. The negative hero, more keenly perhaps

\(^1\) In addition to these studies, see the following works for further insights into Fernández Cubas’s literary corpus in general and *El ángulo del horror* in particular: Glenn (1992); Ortega (1992); Pérez (1998); Glenn and Pérez (2005).

\(^2\) Of particular note among these scholars are Jessica Folkart, whose contributions to our understanding of Fernández Cubas’s works I detail hereafter, and Julie Gleue. See the latter’s dissertation study: Gleue (1994).
than the traditional hero, challenges our assumptions, raising anew the question of how we see, or wish to see ourselves. The antihero is often a perturber and a disturber. The accompanying critique of heroic concepts involves strategies of destabilization and...carries ethical and political implications (Brombert 1999, p. 2).3

Ultimately, the antihero is a failure but only of sorts. He or she is someone who for various reasons refuses to do what is accepted as heroic and thus live up to society’s expectations. In so doing—or not doing as is more properly the case—this person suggests another kind of ideal, another litmus test for what might be considered “acceptable.” This opens up a whole realm of possibilities for all associated literary characters. It is precisely in this vein that Fernández Cubas’s third anthology recovers its status as “women centered” for in this collection of stories, through their relationship with antiheroes or in playing the antihero themselves, women characters manage to negotiate successfully a far wider range of roles, behaviors and circumstances than would otherwise have been sanctioned within societal boundaries. What follows, then, is an exploration of the ways in which the antiheroic protagonists in El ángulo del horror serve as a unique vehicle through which the female subject is endowed with discursive agency and is as a result redefined in profoundly original ways.

(Music)Notes from Underground: “Helicón”

The protagonist of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground is widely held as the seminal antiheroic figure of twentieth-century literature. An emotional cripple, the Underground Man exists in a self-imposed moral vacuum from which he lambastes society for its own lost sense of values (Brombert 1999, p. 7). He directs his caustic first-person narration at a group of fictional “gentlemen,” thus splitting his own personality and indicating both his need for and fear of “the other, his judgment, his glance” (Brombert 1999, p. 36). 4 Much like Fernández Cubas’s characters in general, this paradoxical figure—he simultaneously condemns and craves societal approval—is a supremely ambiguous one for whom a specific identity is impossible (Brombert 1999, p. 33). His single constant resides in the fact that he consistently “wills himself outside and in opposition to the norm” (Brombert 1999, p. 37). He despises “any deterministic system that would force a human being to obey the predictable laws of a calculating table, to be no more than a cogwheel, to have no more freedom than a piano key or an organ stop” (Brombert 1999, p. 39).

Brombert’s reference to music is significant to my purposes here as it speaks to

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3 In this essay, I adopt Brombert’s cogent working definition of the antihero in the context of modern European literature as part of my theoretical framework. For further insights, consult Furst (1976), and Elias Rivers, “The Anti-Hero in Spain,” IBID.

4 The importance of this glance or gaze as it relates to subjectivity is reminiscent of its function in Fernández Cubas as described by Folkart in that it allows for abjection, that differentiation of self and other, of I and not-I, that results in the formation of self. For further information, see Folkart, Ch. 5 “Plotting Desire: The Visual Construction of the Subject in El ángulo del horror,” pp. 186–223.
the primary symbol foregrounding the first and arguably most ingenious story in *El ángulo del horror*, “Helicón.” Spires, in fact, posits that the helicon or tuba whence the story gets its name

…can be considered a metaphor for the …discordant notes that threaten to subvert not only the illusion of [the protagonist’s] linear and euphonious life and logic, but the rationality supposedly underpinning the contemporary world (Spires 1995, p. 238).

As quickly becomes apparent, also at risk in “Helicón” are traditional expectations and definitions of gender. And toward that end, what emerges in this, the introductory movement of Fernández Cubas’s quirky narrative sonata, is the first of several Underground Women.

By his own admission, the protagonist in this story is a dualistic figure who plays out his own “particular interpretación de Jekyll-Hyde” (Fernández Cubas, p. 39). Paradoxically, at the same time that he admits to playing this character type, he also asserts his individuality and insists on his right to revel in it, alone:

…lo cierto es que…yo me sentía un hombre relativamente feliz, sin interrogantes, sin dudas, y ciertos pasatiempos, a los que me entregaba muy de vez en cuando, no me parecían otra cosa que el encuentro obligado y saludable con uno mismo, la parcela de privacidad absolutamente necesaria para que uno disfrute, por unos momentos, de la insustituible compañía de sí mismo (p. 28).

Likeable, timid, and otherwise wholly ordinary, Marcos invents an alternative persona for himself when, naked and unwashed, he is surprised by the unannounced arrival of Violeta, a female friend, while sitting in his filthy apartment playing, of all things, the tuba. Seeking to displace his own embarrassment and guilt at having been caught in such a state, he invents an alternative persona for himself and tells his visitor that he is Cosme, Marcos’s brother. With that, he shoos her—abashed and apologetic—out of the apartment. He considers this emotional turning of tables a “gran triunfo” (p. 31) from which, under different circumstances, he would have derived tremendous pleasure. In taking delight in the discomfort he causes his female friend who sees him “desnudo, despeinado y pringoso” (p. 30), his resemblance to the Underground Man intensifies as, in his own treatment of women, Doostoevsky’s antihero is also titillated by their aversion to “his own pale, loathsome, nasty face, with disheveled hair.”

The satisfaction Marcos/Cosme derives from female discomfiture reaches its apogee with Angela, a love interest who learns of Cosme through Violeta. Curiously obsessed with twins, the beautiful, somewhat prim Angela is herself a twin sister to

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5 Dostoevsky’s Underground Man is similarly paradoxical in his own dual nature. As Brombert observes: “Hostile to himself, driven by what he calls a ‘hysterical craving for contradictions’ (II, 1), the underground man does, however, present himself both as a unique self and a representative type. He thereby undermines all binary oppositions…” (Brombert 1999, p. 31).

6 Of the Underground Man’s relationship with one of these characters, Brombert observes that “he derives a keen satisfaction from appearing so revolting to the woman he will seek to humiliate in every possible way” (Brombert 1999, p. 32).
Eva, an actual person who happens to be remarkably similar to the fictitious Cosme. In sharp contrast to her sister [“la perfección de su atuendo, de su peinado, la serenidad de su porte” (p. 47)], Eva enters the story “surodosa, despeinada, jadeante” (p. 39) and later sits unconcernedly picking her nose in a restaurant.

Angela hides her sister’s existence, but when in a chance street encounter Eva mistakes Marcos for Cosme and in the process leaves him senseless and breathless with a passionate kiss, what results is a two-way case of mistaken identity. Marcos meets Eva, thinks she is Angela, and is infuriated that the prudish Angela would desire his fictional, unsavory doppelganger despite her apparent aversion to twins; Eva meets Marcos and, believing him to be Cosme, locks him in an ardent embrace thinking that he is the brutish tuba-playing ogre Marcos created to ward off embarrassment. When a contrite Angela divulges the existence of Eva, a still confused Marcos berates her mercilessly and in so doing derives haughty pleasure from her humiliation: “me sentía orgulloso, tremendamente orgulloso de mí mismo” (pp. 45–55). Thereafter, when he finally realizes that the woman whose passionate kiss, “distante años luz” from Angela’s customary “beso insípido, cortés…de muchachita bien rangée” (p. 43), is in fact Angela’s twin, Marcos abandons his original lover and his original identity in favor of Eva, Cosme, and his helicon.

Several features of the antihero are manifest in the protagonist of this story. In the first place, his pursuit of self-satisfaction is the foundation of his misfortune. His secret uncouth, hebephrenic7 passion for naked tuba-playing causes him to invent his alter-ego through whom he then exerts disturbing and disruptive force on the female characters in his life, namely Violeta, Angela, and Eva. He is, furthermore, driven to invent Cosme because of self-consciousness, another trait of the antihero. His ability to do so suggests that he can see his problems from a point outside himself and thus also sees the black humor of his situation. Finally, and for my purposes here most importantly, as an antihero, a primary motivating factor in determining his behavior is a desire to gain power over others. He thrives on his humiliation first of Violeta and next of Angela. And conveniently, he is able to craft and utilize his alter-ego and switch flexibly and voluntarily between both until he ultimately “contracts out” of the confines of his social circle by abandoning the Marcos persona entirely.8 As Spires and Folkart both rightly point out, Angela has no such flexibility.

The fictional Cosme can be read as male antisocial behavior (Spires 1995, p. 242) and by inventing him, Marcos has created a ready, socially acceptable excuse for his penchant for the absurd, the ugly, the frowned-upon. Angela, on the other hand, gets no such free pass, as it were. Fearing society’s disapproval, she hides the existence of Eva, while Marcos can be Cosme at will. Her fears are ultimately well-justified as Angela is derided by Marcos when he unwittingly—yet understandably based on his own behavior—mistakes her for her crude, disheveled, sexually aggressive sister.

7 In her analysis of this story, Pérez describes hebephrenia as a form of adolescent-onset schizophrenia distinguishable by childish or silly behavior (Pérez 1995–1996, p. 160).
8 Furst posits that the antihero’s antipathy toward societal values—rather than eliciting vehement opposition—prompts a “contracting out” or withdrawal from society (Furst 1976, p. 62). This evasiveness is clearly apparent in Marcos’s/Cosme’s behavioral patterns here.
However, through her interaction with Marcos/Cosme, the combined persona of Angela/Eva is, in fact, given leave both to behave in similarly unacceptable ways and to dispense with socially acceptable behavior altogether. Metaphorically speaking, through Marcos’s final selection, Eva survives at story’s end where Angela does not. In literally and figuratively dumping Angela in this fashion, Fernández Cubas suggests that Eva, in all her earthy, tawdry splendor, achieves ultimate primacy despite Marcos/society’s censure. Like a chrysalis from which emerges an entirely new identity, the prudishly perfect, socially acceptable Angela is discarded in favor of the disconcerting Eva who, like Cosme, represents the antisocial, the abject, the not-I—in short, those oppositional characteristics upon which the very definition of self usually depends. Marcos/Cosme’s pattern of behavior, having paved the way, makes such a complete metamorphosis possible for this female character.

All in the Family: “El legado del abuelo”

Antiheroism runs in the family in “El legado del abuelo,” the second of this collection’s four stories. Indeed, one might conjecture that the true legacy of the patriarch of the family in this story is his very status as a negative model. Absent the father, it is the grandson who inherits the characteristic antiheroic traits from this figure—chiefly, pettiness, insecurity, egocentrism and isolation. However, the person who in the end benefits most from this legacy is, once again, a woman.

The story centers on the death of an elderly patriarch who resided with his widowed youngest daughter and her son for some time prior to his demise. The death and surrounding events are recounted years later by the now adult grandson looking back on his childhood. Through this first-person narration, we learn of the self-imposed exile of the retired army general, his avariciousness, and his mocking of self and others: “No hablaba nunca y, si lo hacía, era sólo para exigir, reñir o protestar por algo” (p. 57). We also are made aware of his nasty, juvenile treatment of his own grandson whose piggy bank he robs while at the same time hoarding his own apparently meager treasures in a Chinese trinket box. Described by his offspring as “[a]risco, gruñón y perennemente enfadado” (p. 76), this crusty old curmudgeon’s nastiness comes full circle when the grandson, in a retaliatory gesture, holds his life-saving pills out of arms reach, unwittingly bringing on the heart attack that kills him.

The grandson/narrator shows us the hypocrisy and dark humor surrounding adult behavior in the confrontation of death as seen from a child’s perspective: the wringing hands and laudatory eulogizing that quickly yet temporarily replace the anger and resentment associated with seeing to the needs of a grumpy old miser who by the time of his death has let himself go to the point where his daughter and the housemaid are forced to lay him out in pajama bottoms and “una chilaba de beduino que se había traído [el difunto] de cuando la guerra de Africa” (p. 69). We are further made to see the grandson’s deep desire for his mother’s attention, his anger and frustration when she dismisses his statements (“—¿Por qué dices mentiras?” [p. 78]; “—¡Qué tontería!” [p. 88]), and his resultant pain and withdrawal from her
and all other surrounding characters (‘‘Sentía ganas de llorar, una rabia desconocida’’ [p. 78], ‘‘…de mi boca no surgiría una palabra’’ [p. 89]).

First the object of affection and a certain oedipal attraction,9 the mother gradually becomes the focus of the narrator’s derision, hatred, and rejection as she, too, begins to withdraw from those around her. Lacking a last will and testament, her siblings search in vain for some evidence of their father’s inheritance, ‘‘…en qué consistían sus bienes y por qué [el abuelo] se mostraba tan seguro…de que él no iba a terminar en un asilo…’’ (p. 77). Failing to find any proof of the hinted-at wealth even after tearing her father’s bedroom furniture to shreds, the mother begins to shrink from the accusatory glare of her family, including her son. Her defeatist behavior incites further filial derision that results at the last in the narrator’s escape from the family home by way of a continuous series of ‘‘vacaciones que significaban colonias de verano primero, casas de amigos después y viajes de estudios ahora…’’ (p. 94). The mother, however, escapes as well—by becoming a ‘‘residente por voluntad propia en un balneario repleto de ancianos’’ (p. 94).

Years later, the narrator discovers to his shame that his grandfather’s inheritance, so long thought meager, nonexistent or at least well-hidden, had been in his possession all along. The grandfather’s own ersatz piggy bank contains a pile of yellowed photographs and a dingey old smoking pipe. Having absconded with the box on the day of the grandfather’s death, the narrator cleans off the pipe years later and discovers it to be made of solid gold and inscribed with a dedication to his mother, «Para María Teresa, mi hija.» When he contritely calls her to report his findings and suggest a possible reunion, his mother dismisses him one final time with the words from his past ‘‘¡Qué tontería! Si el abuelo no había fumado nunca…’’ (p. 96). The story then concludes with the narrator’s dawning awareness that he himself is now a foreigner in his mother’s life and that the person consigned to the elderly asylum that his grandfather had so feared is she.

Initially desiring acceptance, then exerting a disruptive and indeed destructive force on those around him, the narrator first kills his grandfather in an act of juvenile revenge and then with his constant accusatory glare abandons his mother to a sort of elderly jail. At story’s end, the adult narrator seems to take some hollow responsibility for his mother’s circumstances, claiming that ‘‘había hecho precisamente de mi madre lo que [el abuelo] siempre temió que hiciéran consigo’’ (p. 96). However, the mother takes up residence not in ‘‘un asilo’’ but ‘‘un balneario’’ which, while evidently catering to the aged, is nevertheless a spa to which the mother escapes not forcibly but rather ‘‘por voluntad propia.’’ From this space, she sends her son a post card as if she herself is on vacation. And well she might be. For in voluntarily leaving the scene where she spent years in servitude to both her father and her son in order to take up residence amongst a mature population, she has

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9 In noting the apparent adult fixation on clothing where death is concerned, the narrator-as-child describes his own mother’s funereal attire on the day of grandfather’s demise: ‘‘mi madre, vestida con un traje negro…me parecían más alta y delgada. «Demasiado escotado», decía. Pero yo la encontraba muy guapa así’’ (C-F, p. 67). Shortly thereafter, his attraction is manifest when he says ‘‘[m]e sentía muy a gusto allí, en el sofá, al lado de mi madre…y deseé que aquel momento en que nos habían dejado solos no acabara nunca’’ (p. 68).

Underground Woman
Michelle C. Geoffrion Vinci 640
gained a reprieve and a place from which to begin anew, as the recipient rather than the constant provider of care.

The narrator-as-child behaves as children and antiheros often do. He is hungry for the attention—the gaze—of his mother and arguably his taciturn grandfather. When he doesn’t receive it in sufficient quantities, he acts out first at the latter, then the former. His desire to control is manifest in his behavior with each—first in holding his grandfather’s life-saving pills at arm’s reach, then in his unvarying scrutiny, resentment and disapproval of his mother. He himself admits this as an adult: “Veía mi mirada de rey destronado, escrutando a mi madre, acusándola en silencio, convirtiéndome en el juez de una situación que únicamente los nervios, las circunstancias y mi obsesiva presencia podían provocar” (p. 96). In hiding the grandfather’s memory box from his mother, he attempts to control her as well, and he certainly succeeds in manipulating her relationship with her siblings into one of distrust and condemnation. Finally, as a child, the narrator is automatically on the outside of the adult culture into which he was born as the only son of a widowed mother. However, he also deliberately rejects the social boundaries of his age, choosing to wander the streets alone after school and ultimately to abandon his forced visits with his girl cousins whom he disparages bitterly for their stereotypically female behavior: “no [sabían] hacer otra cosa que vestir y desvestir a una docena de muñecas, hablar por los codos o imitar las voces de sus madres” (p. 85).

In sum, this egocentric, bitter, deliberately damaging character personifies the antihero whose disturbing behavior wreaks havoc on the lives of those closest to him, even resulting in one case in death. And yet, his role in bringing about the chain of events in this story is essential for what it ultimately allows his mother to do, that is, reject the punishing social confines in which she herself had lived for so long as dutiful daughter, sibling, mother. At the same time that he ridicules his girl cousins for their attempts to emulate traditional womanly roles, he unwittingly provides the necessary incentive for his own mother to shirk them. In a richly symbolic moment at the end of the narrative, the mother dismisses the very existence of the grandfather’s golden pipe/phallus, the patriarchal hegemony, and its associated rules and roles as “tontería.”

Death Becomes Him…but Her? “El ángulo del horror”

Janet Pérez describes the title story of this work as “[un]questionably, the most enigmatic and indecipherable of the four stories in the collection” (Pérez 1995–1996, p. 167). Spires posits that it “challenges the conventional distinction between fantasy and reality” (Spires 1995, p. 234). Folkart highlights in this work “the desire to see and be seen as fundamental to knowledge” (Folkart 2002, p. 209). What remains to be seen, as it were, involves another case of family dynamics, a prodigal son who passes on the characteristics of the antihero to his younger sisters, and the consequent impact antiheroism has on the subjectivity of these female characters. “El ángulo del horror” is the only story in this collection that is narrated in the third person. From the story’s beginning, this outsider’s perspective forecasts the
antitheroic abjection to come and allows for more direct, almost scientific scrutiny of two protagonists—in this case, a sister and brother. The former is devoted to the latter and eagerly awaits his return from England where he had spent the summer studying. The much-anticipated homecoming is marred by the young man’s mysterious illness. Julia is unnerved by the once handsome, outgoing, clever Carlos’s sudden change in behavior:

Encerrado con llave en una habitación oscura, fingiendo hallarse ligeramente indispuesto, abandonando la soledad de la buhardilla tan sólo para comer, siempre a disgusto, oculto tras unas opacas gafas de sol, refugiándose en un silencio exasperante e insólito (p. 99).

She resolves to find out the cause of the change and is disconcerted to discover that Carlos’s view of his surroundings is constantly skewed as if in a dream. The only thing Carlos sees from a normal perspective is Julia herself: “a ti, Julia,” he tells her, in awe, “a ti aún puedo mirarte” (p. 111). So troubled by this change, Carlos ultimately commits suicide and upon his death, Julia discovers that she has inherited his vision problem and the accompanying ability to see clearly only her own younger sister, Marta.

Carlos’s psychological malady is prompted by a dream he had while in England in which he was able to use logic to control events and thus tolerate things being not quite as they normally are. This is a trick Julia admits to using in her own dreams when Carlos divulges the nature of his problem—in essence, the continuation of the warped dream state perspective even while awake and contemplating the family’s summer home:

—Era la casa, la casa en la que estamos ahora tú y yo, la casa en la que hemos pasado todos los veranos desde que nacimos. Y, sin embargo, había algo muy extraño en ella. Algo tremendamente desagradable y angustioso que al principio no supe precisar. Porque era exactamente esta casa, sólo que, por un extraño don o castigo, yo la contemplaba desde un insólito ángulo de visión (p. 109).

Julia’s inheritance of this oneiric angle of vision occurs immediately upon discovering her brother’s lifeless body. In her eyes, his corpse takes the form of Death herself, “la gran ladrona, burdamente disfrazada con rasgos ajenos” (p. 114). Subsequently, her father resembles a skeletal clown and her mother’s skin begins to melt. She escapes from this macabre scene only to encounter young Marta who, in contrast to the rest of the family, continues to appear in her sister’s sight as “una criatura preciosa” (p. 115).

Carlos’s antitheroic behavior is clearly in evidence in this story. Pale, gaunt, and silently despairing, he shuts himself off from his family and from his traditional role as eldest and only son. Even prior to locking himself away in his room, he places himself on the outside of Spanish society by studying in England. Thereafter, he avoids his father’s good-natured pestering about “las rubias jovencitas de Brighton” (p. 102), the more traditional topic of interest among strapping young men. He fails to return to his role as Julia’s confidant and guide to life when he comes back to his native land and family home. He only resumes interaction with Julia in order to lay
upon her his affliction. His ultimate demise causes only further suffering, for the entire family and most notably his sisters, the recipients of his legacy.

And yet. Here again, thanks to the wonderful shades of gray with which Fernández Cubas so often plays in her works, it is never explicitly clear that Julia and her younger sister will suffer the same fate. At least not willingly. The story, in fact, ends not with Julia shutting herself into a darkened room like her unfortunate brother but rather bursting out of it and into the presence of her younger sister. Rather than resigning herself to Carlos’s fate, she rails against it in a very unladylike manner: “Le hizo echarse a tierra y golpear las baldosas con los puños” (p. 115). While she waits and watches quietly throughout much of the story, at its conclusion, she screams and beats her fists as her younger sister looks on, realizing as Julia herself had in Carlos’s presence that “le estaba ocurriendo algo” (p. 115). At the end of the day, Julia inherits from Carlos an outsider’s disposition but is as a result embodied with the means and the excuse by which to break with traditional patterns of behavior—not only for women but for antiheros, too. While we don’t truly know what happens next—it remains up to the female characters with which the narrative concludes—there exists the possibility of survival, even renewal, for Julia and Marta thanks to this new perspective.

A Stranger in a Strange Land: “La Flor de España”

Despite Pérez’s assertions regarding the indecipherability of the previously discussed narrative, I make this story out to be the most inscrutable of the collection for the manner in which it obfuscates the complexities of cultural and national identity. With respect to the antihero and its enabling impact on Fernández Cubas’s female characters, however, this narrative is perhaps the most revelatory. Toward that end, “La Flor de España” is the only story in the collection narrated by a woman, and as it turns out, this very figure is also the antihero.

An ex-patriot Spaniard living in an unnamed Northern country, the narrator is constantly brought up against the contrasts between her native land and this snow-covered adopted nation “de idioma incomprensible en la que anochece a las tres de la tarde y no se ve un alma por la calle a partir de las cuatro” (p. 119). Curiously, however, she feels disenfranchised by both this northern geography and her fellow ex-pats who form a self-described colony there. Of the latter, she discovers that what seemed initially to be national pride is actually more of a fixation with regional identity: “Todos…teníamos nuestro lugar de origen marcado a hierro en la frente, como si se tratara de dejar las cartas sobre la mesa, evitar confusiones o propiciar de antemano afinidades, enfrentamientos o chistes” (pp. 130–131).

As an itinerant language teacher amidst a more well-healed set of doctors, chemists, and artists who all seem bent on fitting her into a definable category, she finds herself outside the norm: “Me sentí un poco en el exilio” (p. 131). From this position, she begins to question—as only a good antihero should—the validity of that norm, of what it means to be on the inside of it, to be “como nosotros”: “…además de un solemne estupidez, me pareció una aseveración un tanto

Underground Woman
Michelle C. Geoffrion Vinci 643
discutible. Primero; ¿cómo éramos nosotros? O mejor; ¿era bueno o malo ser como nosotros?’’ (p. 133)

When she stumbles upon a store that sells Spanish imports, she becomes obsessed with Rosita, the store’s owner after whom the shop gets its name, La Flor de España. Rosita is cold to the narrator from the outset and this spurs the latter to near daily visits to the shop, almost as if she were stalking its proprietor. When the shop closes for the summer (due to Rosita’s nervous breakdown clearly precipitated by the narrator’s unrelenting attention), the narrator vacations with the native northern wives of the Spanish colonists. Over the course of the summer, she becomes more and more culturally assimilated through her growing relationship with this circle of native northern women. In contrast, Rosita who has spent the summer in Spain, returns looking more stereotypically Spanish—tanned, relaxed, glamorous. However, when the narrator also returns and resumes her obsessive behavior, Rosita is again overcome and passes out over the shop counter.

Like the members of ‘‘la colonia,’’ Rosita and La Flor de España appear stubbornly to cling to Spanish language, traditions, customs and food, ignoring the cultural realities of the anonymous northern nation in which they are situated. They hold tightly to what it means to be ‘‘como nosotros’’ to the exclusion of those around them. It is perhaps for this reason that the narrator, already at odds philosophically with her fellow Spanish nationals, elects to focus compulsively on Rosita and her shop. She asks relentless, often ridiculous questions of the proprietress in regard to her wares: How does this bottle of Rioja compare to others? Does she carry coconut turron? How does she salvage overcooked stew? Through her narrator’s bizarre behavior, Fernández Cubas returns to the original questioning of the meaning of ‘‘like us’’ and the futility of insisting on what might be considered inconsequential distinctions. By the same token, the figure of Rosita also metaphorically suggests that insistence on cultural distinctions is a small-minded enterprise. Physically, this blonde, ample-bottomed, high heel-wearing individual presides from behind her shop counter, queen of all she surveys (‘‘…majestuosa en su puesto de Gran Consulesa…’’ [p. 147]). Yet in actuality, she is a caricature, a pallid, washed-out dwarf.

Nevertheless, the female narrator, already and admittedly on the outside of all normative social confines in the story—that is, those represented by the adopted land and her native one—demonstrates in her incessant stalking of Rosita that antiheroic need to gain control over others. And she appears to succeed in this endeavor to such an extent that she brings about the latter’s psychological ruin. Of all the antiheroes in this story compendium, she is the only one who manages to cause the total collapse of her victim. Moreover, also unlike the other antiheroes, this narrator seems to embrace at least one social system in the end.

Her rejection of ‘‘la colonia’’ runs in tandem with an apparent sympathy for the native wives of some of its members, all of whom by dint of language and culture are also disenfranchised by their husbands’ select group. From the outset, in fact, there is an unspoken connection between the narrator and these women, and this rapport is solidified when the narrator spends the summer vacationing with them. She improves her own fluency in their language and culture to the point where they award her a traditional necklace ‘‘que se trataba sobre todo de un distintivo. 
Un implacable quién es quién. Una frontera o aduana entre las aborígenes y las extranjeras, las integradas y las turistas…” (p. 155). Despite this mark of assimilation, however, the narrator continues to question the validity of any cultural distinction as a means of self-identification. Upon receipt of the necklace, she muses: “…supe, aunque nada dijeron, captar la profundidad de su mensaje: «Ahora empiezas a ser un poco de las nuestras». Un poco, sí, era cierto. Pero, ¿y ellas? ¿Serían alguna vez como yo, como nosotros?” (p. 155).

Ultimately, this would-be antiheroic figure does not accept the futility of her fate or even fail in the life she makes for herself. Rather than quitting the school she was teaching in and abandoning this northern place as she had earlier intended, she determines to stay, to make a life for herself on her own terms within the parameters of her adopted culture. Despite (or perhaps because) of Rosita’s ultimate ruin, the narrator is decidedly upbeat. At story’s end, she turns her back on this ill-fated, diminished representative of cultural intransigence and returns to her new home in the cold north, even anticipating with eagerness the coming long winter.

In sum, in this fascinating collection of stories, the male antihero appears to empower his female counterparts with more agency than they otherwise would have within the traditional confines of their expected roles in society. However, when the antihero is ultimately a woman, it is she herself who gains increased authority. In the case of “La Flor de España,” this figure, while initially exhibiting the standard characteristics of the antihero—to wit, bitterness, despair, desire for attention, disruptiveness and destructiveness—she ultimately claims a space for herself with which she can be content, as an outsider on the inside who recognizes and accepts the incongruities of cultural identity and humanity’s apparent need for the same. This kind of curiously ambiguous space is one that Fernández Cubas celebrates in all of her works—that underground place full of “grises y clarosuros” (Glenn 1993, p. 360) without limits and definitions that is uniquely her own.

References


Underground Woman
Michelle C. Geoffrion Vinci