



## STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (108)

TEXT: *El viejo, el asesino, yo, y otros cuentos*

AUTHOR: Ena Lucía Portela

EDITOR: Iraida H. López

### 1. Overview for Instructors

This is the first anthology devoted to the short fiction of **Ena Lucía Portela (Havana, 1972)**, one of the most original voices of the so-called **novísimos**—Cuban writers who came of age in the 1990s, during the “Special Period”.

The volume gathers nine stories published between 1993 and 2008, originally dispersed across collections and journals, and concludes with the testimonial text «**Alas rotas**», about living with Parkinson’s disease. Together, these pieces:

- Map Portela’s evolution as a short-story writer.
- Offer an accessible entry into the broader corpus of her fiction and essays.
- Place students in direct contact with post-revolutionary Cuban literature that is both playful and sharply critical.

The **introductory essay by Iraida H. López** locates Portela within three key moments of Cuban narrative since 1959 (“literatura de la violencia”, 1980s everyday-life fiction, and the 1990s novísimos). It also explains how Portela’s work both participates in and departs from these trends.

Extensive **footnotes**, prepared jointly by López and Portela, clarify cultural references, literary allusions, and Cuban slang, combining academic information with Portela’s own witty, personal comments.

### 2. Why This Text Works in the Classroom

#### **Contemporary Cuban context made teachable**

The introduction and notes give students enough historical and cultural background (Special Period, “new boom”, “cubamanía”) to engage without getting lost in context.

#### **Ludic and contestatory at once**

Stories are fun to read—full of irony, games with the reader, and dense intertextuality—while addressing violence, marginality, sexuality, and disillusionment with grand narratives.

#### **Metafiction and intertextuality**

Portela constantly foregrounds literature itself: citations, allusions, rewriting of fairy tales, and reflections on writing as a craft. Excellent material for courses on narrative theory and metafiction.

#### **Gender and sexuality beyond clichés**

The book includes lesbian relationships, queer desire, and female protagonists without reducing them to “identity” case studies. The text invites nuanced discussions of gender, feminism, and their limits.

#### **Short, self-contained narratives**

Each story can be read and discussed in one or two class sessions, making the book ideal for modules within broader courses on Latin American literature, women’s writing, or the contemporary novel.

#### **Suggested course contexts:**

- Contemporary Cuban Narrative / Post-Revolutionary Literature



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- Latin American Short Fiction Since 1980
- Gender and Sexuality in Latin American Literature
- The Fantastic, the Grotesque, and the Abject
- Metafiction and Intertextuality in Hispanic Narrative

### 3. Suggested Reading Sequences

#### A. The “novísimos” and post-revolutionary Cuba

- **Core texts from the introduction + selected stories:**
- **Introductory sections on:**
  - “Toda generación tiene sus orígenes: Cuba al filo de los noventa”
  - “¿Qué aportan de nuevo los novísimos?”
- **Stories:**
  - «La urna y el nombre (un cuento jovial)»
  - «El viejo, el asesino y yo»
  - «Alguna enfermedad muy grave»
- **Discussion angles:**

How does the Special Period (scarcity, “resolviendo”, double moral) appear explicitly or implicitly in these stories?  
In what sense are these writers “posrevolucionarios”?  
How does Portela play with the idea of “marginality becoming center” (jineteras, outsiders, queer subjects, etc.)?

#### B. Literature, authorship, and the blurred line between reality and fiction

- **Core stories:**
  - «El viejo, el asesino y yo»
  - «La urna y el nombre (un cuento jovial)»
  - «Alguna enfermedad muy grave»
- **Discussion axes:**

Autobiographical echoes: to what extent can we read the narrators as versions of “Ena Lucía Portela” herself?  
How do literary, cinematic, and cultural references function in these stories? Are they decoration, or do they structure meaning?  
How do these texts question the border between life and literature?

#### C. The abject, the grotesque, and voyeurism

- **Core stories:**
  - «Un loco dentro del baño»
  - «Al fondo del cementerio»
  - «Desnuda bajo la lluvia»
  - «Huracán»
- **Possible questions:**

How does Portela use **the abject** (Kristeva’s notion: what repels and fascinates) in the description of bodies, spaces, and desires?



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Who watches whom? How does voyeurism structure the reader's own position in the text?

In what ways are violence and the grotesque employed to "erizar y divertir" (to unsettle and entertain) at the same time?

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#### D. Rewriting popular and canonical narratives

- **Core texts:**

«El sueño secreto de Cenicienta»

References in the introduction to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, fairy tales, and other canonical texts.

- **Teaching ideas:**

Compare Portela's rewriting of "Cinderella" with students' knowledge of the classic tale (or with other Latin American rewritings of fairy tales).

How does Portela link the fairy-tale script to contemporary media (telenovelas, celebrity culture, romance narratives)?

Where does the story situate "happiness"? In marriage? In talent, ambition, or alternative pleasures?

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#### 4. Sample Discussion Questions

You can use these as prompts for in-class discussion, online forums, or short written responses.

**Politics as "a theme, not the theme"**

In «Alguna enfermedad muy grave» and «El viejo, el asesino y yo», how does politics appear—center stage, or in the background?

What might Portela mean by treating politics as "a theme, not the theme"?

**Body, desire, and normativity**

In «Un loco dentro del baño» or «Al fondo del cementerio», what does the text present as "abnormal" or "monstrous"?

How do these stories destabilize the reader's own sense of normality?

**Game with the reader**

Take a story where clues about the ending are "seeded" in the title, epigraph, or early pages (for example, «El viejo, el asesino y yo» or «Desnuda bajo la lluvia»).

How does Portela signal what is coming?

Where does she misdirect the reader or withhold information?

**Intertextual maps**

Ask students to identify and research 2–3 allusions in any given story (authors, films, musicians, historical figures).

How do those references expand the meaning of the scene?

Do they add irony, gravity, or a sense of literary lineage?

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#### 5. Short Written Assignments

##### Close reading (2–3 pages)

Select a passage where Portela describes an abject or grotesque scene (for example, from «Un loco dentro del baño» or «Al fondo del cementerio»).

Analyze the language choices (adjectives, metaphors, rhythm).

Explain how the passage produces simultaneous attraction and repulsion.

Relate this to a larger theme in the story (marginality, surveillance, sexuality, etc.).



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### Comparative essay (4–5 pages)

Compare one Portela story with a text by another Latin American author dealing with crisis and disillusionment (for example, Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, Reinaldo Arenas, or a continental post-dictatorship writer).

How do they represent scarcity, urban decay, or the end of utopias?

What is similar or different in tone (cynical, playful, tragic)?

How does gender or sexuality shape the representation of crisis?

### Creative + critical assignment

Invite students to write a 2–3 page story fragment “à la Portela” that:

- Includes at least two explicit cultural or literary references.
- Uses a first-person narrator who is not entirely reliable.
- Plays with at least one taboo or uncomfortable subject.

Follow with a 1–2 page reflection explaining the choices made and how they relate to Portela’s techniques.

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## 6. Assessment Ideas

- **Reading journals** focused on:
  - Instances of metafiction (moments when the text comments on writing).
  - Occurrences of abject imagery.
  - Intertextual references they recognize or research.
- **Group presentations**  
Each group presents one story, mapping:
  - Historical context (Cuba in the 1990s).
  - Main themes (gender, marginality, violence, play).
  - A visual “intertextual map” of the references they found.
- **Oral exams or in-class debates**  
Example motions:
  - “Portela’s fiction is fundamentally pessimistic about Cuba’s future.”
  - “Portela’s use of humor neutralizes the political force of her critique.”

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## 7. Additional Context for Instructors

- Portela was selected in 2007 as one of the **Bogotá39** (39 Latin American writers under 39), and her novel **Cien botellas en una pared**

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### Explore the “Short Fiction for the Hispanic Literature Classroom” Collection:

This volume is part of our curated short-fiction series designed for university courses in Hispanic literature, women’s writing, and the fantastic, alongside titles such as *El viejo, el asesino, yo, y otros cuentos* (Ena Lucía Portela), *Feigüele y Otras Mujeres* (Cecilia Absatz), *Cuentos de La Habana Elegante* (Ramón Meza et al.), *Cuentos de Muerte y de Sangre* (Ricardo Güiraldes), and *Tradiciones Peruanas (las más cortas)* (Ricardo Palma).

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