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# Breaking the Gender Binary: Feminism and Transgressive Female Desire in Lucía Etxebarria's *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* and *La Eva futura/La letra futura*

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**Abstract:** The popular texts of Spanish author Lucía Etxebarria have created a polemical social phenomenon in contemporary Spain for their blatant depiction of a world of violence, drugs, and experimental sex of the late-millennium youth culture of *Generación X*. These topics, along with Etxebarria's public persona and feminist ideology, have fomented much public criticism and given rise to discussion of the current status of feminism, gender norms, and women's authorship in Spain today. This article analyzes Etxebarria's novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* and her collection of feminist essays *La Eva futura/La letra futura*, demonstrating that Etxebarria's depiction of female desire and sexuality within their cultural context challenges the notion that feminism has no more to achieve and breaks the gender binary by imagining a gender-anonymous world. *Beatriz* delves into the life of the title character, a young woman whose experience with a dissolute social culture and her attempts to understand herself cause her to question stereotypical standards of womanhood and eroticism and to declare that she fits into no such preconceived notions. *Beatriz* is a literary inscription of Etxebarria's feminist ideology as posited in *La Eva futura*, insofar as both these texts blur the line between feminism and postfeminism and engage with consumerist culture and identity. Moreover, they construe a philosophy that pushes the boundaries of normative discourse by mis-citing hegemonic notions of femininity and sexuality and creating the potential for change through such mis-repetition of hegemonic discourse. Ultimately, Etxebarria's work strives for a transgressive, unbound, and fluid female desire that is in continuous reconstruction and defies heteronormative definition.

**Keywords:** Etxebarria (Lucía), *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, *La Eva futura/La letra futura*, postfeminism, feminism in Spanish literature, contemporary Spanish women's literature, sexuality, desire, gender studies, Constitutional Spain.

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The 1998 publication of Lucía Etxebarria's (b. 1966) novel *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* created uproar in the Spanish literary and cultural scene, in part for its boundary-breaking inscription of female desire. Two years later, the Spanish author further developed her ideas on gender and sexuality within the postmodern context in the collection of essays *La Eva futura/La letra futura*. With these texts, Etxebarria cemented her image as an outspoken author addressing social and popular issues who both openly engages with the consumerist aspects of the literary market and challenges, at times problematically, hegemonic images of femininity and female desire in contemporary Spain.<sup>1</sup> In so doing, she created a controversy within Spanish literary and non-literary circles that led to a discussion of the value given to women authors' work in a twenty-first century context, particularly with regard to the blatant expression of sexuality. In what follows, I evaluate Etxebarria's interaction with postfeminist consumerist culture through a discussion of these two

works and I assess the transgressive expression of desire inscribed through the character of Beatriz. Most crucially, I argue, Beatriz embodies a liminal desire and challenges the heteronormative social structure that conflates a binary notion of gender with correlating heterosexual desires. This confrontation points to a larger transgression in the novel that demonstrates the gaps in normative discourses of gender and sexuality and that offers a new space in which a subject can cite non-normative versions of self.

Through the character of Beatriz, Etxebarria defies normative concepts of gender and sexuality, particularly as the novel's protagonist finds her agency through the expression of transgressive forms of gender and desire. Beatriz searches for identity in an environment of angst, familial dysfunction, drugs, sex, and a need to escape her life. Nevertheless, this is not a typical coming-of-age narrative; it breaks free from formulaic conclusions about Beatriz's sense of self, attempting instead to forge a new and precarious concept of sexual desire that refuses to conform to a social binary. As I seek to demonstrate here, the true transgression of *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* is the development and representation of a female desire that attempts to break completely free from gender and its represented problems, creating a greater space for the expression, experience, and definition of sexuality and sexual craving. Moreover, and specifically in the context of Spain's history, these texts must be seen within the framework of the nation's transformation from dictatorship to postmodern democracy, where gender issues have come to be increasingly relevant and visible in social and legal discourses.

Winner of the prestigious Premio Nadal the same year it was published, *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* was an instant commercial success. It is a first-person narrative told out of chronological order by the title character Beatriz, who simultaneously reflects on three different though closely connected time periods of her coming of age: the final disillusioned days she spends in Madrid with her best friend and adolescent crush Mónica, the person who involves Beatriz in a world of drugs and violence before Beatriz moves away; her college years in Edinburgh where she enters into a steady relationship with Cat (Caitlin), a waitress, and a concurrent love affair with Ralph, an older student; and her return to Madrid after a four-year absence, where she realizes that her obsession with Mónica was built on imagination instead of reality, and when she comes to accept herself for who she is. Despite the fact that, at times, Beatriz seems to be channeling Etxebarria's didactic feminist messages, she is also a character that reflects the problems, insecurities, and injustices of a postmodern subject in a fast-paced and rapidly changing world.

In order to understand this late twentieth-century *Bildungsroman* and "the Lucía Etxebarria phenomenon," as Christine Henseler calls it, it is crucial to place Etxebarria within the trajectory of women's writing in the post-Franco era of Constitutional Spain (Henseler 2006, 94). In this time period, the Spanish literary market and the field of literary production have evolved dramatically. Thus, the 1980s in Spain saw a dramatic increase in the number of women authors and the beginnings of a "lesbian literature" with the 1978 publication of Esther Tusquets's *El mismo mar de todos los veranos* (Martín Armas 2006, 16). As further evidence of the loosening of sexual repression left over from Franco's Spain, the Tusquets Editores created the erotic collection La Sonrisa Vertical (The Vertical Smile) and the Premio Sonrisa Vertical (Vertical Smile Award) in 1977 and 1978, which, according to Silvia Bermúdez, aimed to "expand the sexual horizons of Spaniards as they entered an era of democratic governance and major sociological and economic changes" (Bermúdez 2002, 224).<sup>2</sup> Such changes were no less evident in the publishing industry, which by the end of the 1980s had evolved into a capitalist marketplace driven by a "new generation of readers raised in a consumer society" (Tsuchiya 2002a, 139). Yet it is Lucía Etxebarria's *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* that plays a crucial part in the consecration of the Spanish lesbian novel because it participated in the great proliferation of lesbian literature in the country that occurred between 1997 and 2000, when at least seven novels with lesbian protagonists were published with success (Martín Armas 2006, 26).<sup>3</sup>

The time was ripe for this explosion, which was part of a growing trend of works published by young authors for young audiences that were perceived as having a new set of values and expectations (Villena and Castilla 1998; Memba 2000). Indeed, Etxebarria and other young writers of the 1990s are considered to be part of the so-called Generation X or “Generación *Kronen*” of Spain, a group who mixed their own form of literary aesthetic value with a clear attention to the marketing potential of their work (Bermúdez 2002, 224). Although they have been criticized for catering to a youth culture focused on immediate and ephemeral gratification, for Etxebarria the youth of this generation have found themselves in a world that ignores their interests, a world fraught with the broken promises of capitalism and the ideological failures of the left (Etxebarria 2007, 127–28).<sup>4</sup> It is within this cultural context that Etxebarria publishes *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, a novel that is fully immersed in the language and culture of Generation X, with an author who is well aware of the commercial environment in which she is publishing her work.

Through her commercialism, Lucía Etxebarria has made herself a visible and prolific “phenomenon” in contemporary Spain, one whose potential impact has inspired much dispute (Henseler 2006, 94). The criticism of her work has tended to focus on two distinct aspects, namely, the analysis of Etxebarria’s texts themselves and the critique of Etxebarria as a figure within the system of literary and cultural production. Indeed, her presence in the literary field has provoked intense reactions, both positive and negative, because of the way Etxebarria engages with systems of consumerism to the point of selling her own image, causing a debate as to her “actual’ literary value” (Bermúdez 2002, 224). Her antiestablishment attitude, her insistence on using references to popular culture, in particular youth culture and language, and her brazen self-promotion through a discourse of self-defined feminism have led critics such as Ignacio Echevarría to see her as a figure who has become famous as a result of an overblown, empty, and tacky display, and whose literary work is overrated (Echevarría 1998). From this point of view, her literature and that of other young writers of the Spanish Generation X “caters to a generation of socially and ethically disengaged youth who, faced with boredom and an uncertain future, seeks an experience of momentary but intense gratification, through sex, drugs, and mass culture” (Tsuchiya 2002b, 78).

These kinds of criticisms became even more pronounced when, shortly after winning the Premio Nadal for *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, Etxebarria posed for mostly nude photographs for the magazine *Dunia*, indicating that for many the real issue at stake was not the literary quality per se of *Beatriz* or Etxebarria’s other works, but rather the public behavior of Etxebarria herself in relation to popular culture, literature, and consumerism. As various literary critics, including Silvia Bermúdez and Christine Henseler, have pointed out, Etxebarria blatantly exposes the fact that the system of literary production is indeed enmeshed in a market of consumption, and that the author is part and parcel of the commercial exchange of literature. Etxebarria has “turned herself into an advertisement” for her own works, a move that in Henseler’s opinion is “the ultimate avant-garde expression” that manages “to subvert a system that disregards as too popular a large part of the literature written by female authors” (Henseler 2004, 699–700). Along similar lines, Bermúdez argues that Etxebarria uses a feminist paradigm to unveil the manner in which the processes of legitimization and delegitimization occur in the production of cultural capital, particularly for women authors. In so doing, Etxebarria “speak[s] to the importance of self-articulation and self-determination” as a woman author in the creation of prestige and symbolic power (Bermúdez 2002, 233).

For her part, Akiko Tsuchiya recognizes the gender inequalities in the field of literary production and the “double dilemma” that women authors face in the struggle to “gain visibility in predominantly male-controlled media of communication,” a visibility that, when achieved, causes “the commodification of their works into the usual gender-biased stereotypes and commonplaces” (Tsuchiya 2002a, 239–

40). Nevertheless, Tsuchiya finds Etxebarria's particular way of addressing this dilemma to be grossly problematic. She criticizes Etxebarria for her combination of popular culture with feminism in her fictional works. Tsuchiya argues that by working from within the system of popular discourse rather than against it, Etxebarria negates her own feminist message through a cooptation of her values, and thereby reifies instead of transforming the "institutions and structures of thought that have traditionally oppressed women and other marginalized or non-normative subjects" (Tsuchiya 2002a, 250). On the one hand, Tsuchiya acknowledges that Etxebarria's fictional works do address feminist issues "and attempt to deconstruct socially normative conceptualizations of gender and sexuality, thus opening the possibility of alternative constructions of identity" (Tsuchiya 2002b, 79). Yet, for Tsuchiya, Etxebarria's open engagement with the mass market and her use of gender and peripheral sexualities as selling points for her works act not as a subversion of the norm, as Henseler suggests, but rather as a "reaffirmation of those very structures, categories and ideologies that she claims to question" (Tsuchiya 2002b, 80).

This debate reflects the ambiguity of Etxebarria's brand of feminism. For example, she begins *La Eva futura* by trying to package her feminist critique in such a way as to appeal to an audience living in a postfeminist cultural context, that is, by initiating the discussion with the disclaimer that it is not necessary to hate men, be lesbian, or give up using makeup or wearing a bra to be a feminist (Etxebarria 2007, 21). This kind of argument feeds into the negative stereotypes of feminists that circulate in postfeminist discourse, even though Etxebarria's intent appears to be to want to counter them, because it includes an implicit agreement that feminism can be threateningly "a-feminine." Such a backhanded argument in favor of feminism partially undermines Etxebarria's own claims that different sexualities, behaviors, body types, and preferences should be allowed to exist free of judgment. Nevertheless, her work does counter precisely these kinds of stereotypes by focusing on a main goal of challenging gender prejudice and discrimination. As she states, "Ser feminista ... [s]e trata de reclamar el poder de las mujeres y el derecho de cada una de nosotras a utilizar ese poder según nuestros propios términos" (To be feminist ... means to demand the power of women and the right of each one of us to utilize that power according to our own terms) (Etxebarria 2007, 21). In other words, the overarching project of Etxebarria's texts is the direct feminist aim of critiquing social injustices and teaching a general public about gender and sexuality inequalities, despite her at times contradictory arguments that reach out to those whom she is trying to convince that feminism is good.

These conflicting aspects of Etxebarria's work, including the combination of her category of feminism with popular culture and her periodic appeal to problematic stereotypes, lie precisely in her engagement with a postfeminist context. There is no doubt that Etxebarria's use of the market is blatant, and, as she herself affirms, the topics of her novels and other texts are very often commodified into selling points (Etxebarria 2002). The key is the way that this use allows her to work from within the paradigm of postmodern normative discourse and a supposedly postfeminist cultural environment, by appropriating many of the tools of this discourse and this environment in order to challenge them. This move is a mark of her particular feminist stance, which sits at a crossroads between feminism and postfeminism. Etxebarria's novels, as well as her non-fictional and cyberspace work, "offer a unique glimpse into the trappings of twenty-first century female identity" and challenge the Spanish "notion of reality" by means of "the incorporation of contemporary cultural references, feminist and gender issues, and a keen sense of what it means to be living in the twenty-first century" (Everly 2010, 134).

Etxebarria's feminist ideology, as presented in *La Eva futura/La letra futura*, includes a resounding criticism of still-existing sexism, injustices, and inequalities that she sees in Spanish society and Western

society more generally. She addresses a broad range of settings, from private and public spaces to popular culture and the media to the field of literary production. Her text denounces the postfeminist claims that society has reached the utopia of feminist dreams by making the argument that the current, “postfeminist” era is far from being perfect for women. The term “postfeminism” is in and of itself an imperfect one, fraught with complications. As Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon argue, postfeminism “exists both as a journalistic buzzword and as a theoretical stance, as well as a more generalised late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century ‘atmosphere’ and ‘aura’ ... that emerges in the intersections and hybridisation of mainstream media, consumer culture, neoliberal politics, postmodern theory and, significantly, feminism” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 5). On one level, such a postfeminist atmosphere reflects a notion of the “pastness” of feminism, the “post” in this case denoting the idea that feminism is no longer necessary, that it has fulfilled its purpose and now is not only passé but woefully misguided (Genz and Brabon 2009, 3). Etxebarria questions this idea of feminism’s death, bemoaning the fact that young feminists today are told that they do not exist and that feminism is outmoded, and yet, as she states in *La Eva futura*, “la mayoría de las mujeres que no se autodefinen como feministas ... han integrado en su ideario todas las reivindicaciones del movimiento feminista, aun sin saberlo” (the majority of women that do not define themselves as feminist ... have integrated in their ideas the vindications of the feminist movement, even without knowing it) (Etxebarria 2007, 65–66).

Within this kind of postfeminist paradigm there is a reconceptualization of the New Woman, who becomes a figure with a supposedly liberated sexuality, seen as free from both the restraints of prefeminist society and the allegedly puritanical demands of second-wave feminists, who are in turn perceived as non-feminine and sexually frigid. In this context, there is what Angela McRobbie calls a “faux-feminism” that has been appropriated by Western neoliberal discourse from popular culture to governmental and juridical spheres and that simultaneously vilifies feminism as a movement while appropriating as tools certain feminist ideals, such as those of empowerment, choice, and sexual freedom (McRobbie 2009, 1). Choice and freedom are then redefined and attached to the capacity to purchase, reflecting the importance of the consumer market (Genz and Brabon 2009, 8). Postfeminism in this definition offers, as posited by Diane Negra, “the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique,” allowing the modern-day woman to break free from the “shrill feminism” of the 1970s (Negra 2009, 2).

On another level, however, the term postfeminism refers to what Genz and Brabon call a feminist “genealogy” (2009, 3), wherein the “post” indicates a continuation and transformation of feminism through an “interrogative stance” that leads to “a healthy rewriting of feminism, a sign that the women’s movement is continuously in process, transforming and changing itself” (Genz and Brabon 2009, 11). From this perspective, postfeminism is not a “faux-feminism” but rather marks a site of unique cultural and critical hybridity in the way it incorporates popular media and consumer culture into a feminist approach. This facet of postfeminism signals therefore a positive evolution of feminism, marking its potential to adapt and grow with the times.

Postfeminism is not an issue of “either/or” but rather of “both/and,” meaning that while it describes a society of hybridized consumerism, in which feminism is simultaneously shunned and appropriated, it is also an ideological stance that works out of this position of oppositionality to ask new questions. It is at the intersection of these two conceptualizations that Etxebarria’s work can be placed; even as it rejects the notion of the “pastness” of feminism and criticizes hegemonic conceptualizations of femininity and female sexuality and desire, it also fully embodies this hybridization of feminism and popular culture. Etxebarria’s

self-identification fluidly floats between postfeminism, third-wave feminism, and what she calls power feminism, by which she means a feminism that calls for opening a debate about the need to change the “obsolete” conceptualizations of masculine and feminine (Etxebarria 2007, 23). The breakdown of these falsely constructed gender roles, in Etxebarria’s mind, is necessary in order to fully achieve freedom, equality, and understanding in a just society (Etxebarria 2007, 16).

For Etxebarria, the new woman, “la Eva futura” (the future Eve), is represented by “la mujer fuerte.... Un modelo envuelto en el lenguaje de la heterosexualidad, pero que al mismo tiempo atrae conscientemente una mirada lesbiana, una transformación premeditada del juguete masculino en camarada femenina” (the strong woman.... A model enveloped by heterosexual language who at the same time consciously attracts a lesbian gaze, a premeditated transformation of the male toy into female comrade) (Etxebarria 2007, 154). In other words, the woman of the future is in a place of ambiguity regarding her desire and desirability, creating a more fluid relation between the genders and within desires. Moreover, it is in *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* that Lucía Etxebarria takes an interrogative stance towards the normative system of gender and desire through the exploration of dissident female sexualities in the context of late twentieth-century Spain. She interweaves various elements of globalized culture, yet the narrative goes beyond the mere inclusion of cultural references and becomes a postfeminist text in the way that it questions normative gender identities and suggests a viable new option for female desire.

The protagonist Beatriz is a prototype of Etxebarria’s “strong woman,” and her coming of age is a process of development in the direction of this figure. Even more significant is that sex and desire act as catalysts for this process. Beatriz’s experience of sex allows her to explore her identity and to recognize that her desire does not fit social norms. She realizes that she is “una tía muy rara” (a really strange girl) (Etxebarria 1998, 220), that “yo no era una chica con todas las letras, sino una chica falsa.... Y si yo no era una chica, si era algo así como una especie de alienígena infiltrado que no era *él* ni era *ella*, ¿por qué tenía entonces que enamorarme de un hombre y casarme y tener hijos si a mí no me apetecía? ¿Por qué no iba a enamorarme de quien a mí me diera la gana?” (I was not a girl with all of the letters, but rather a false girl.... And if I wasn’t a girl, if I was something like an infiltrated alien species that was neither *he* nor *she*, why then should I have to fall in love with a man and get married and have kids if it didn’t appeal to me? Why wouldn’t I fall in love with whomever I felt like?) (Etxebarria 1998, 144; italics in original). The boundaries of love and desire are hence broadened and expanded, challenging gendered expectations for both the desirer and her object of desire.

The inscription of female desire through Beatriz is subversive to the system of binary and compulsory heterosexuality, and furthermore it undermines the concept of a fixed homosexual or lesbian identity. This in turn is a challenge to gender normativity, in that desire and gender are directly linked in normative discourse, in which feminine and masculine are differentiated as supposedly natural, necessary, and mutually exclusive opposites that are linked by heterosexual desire (Butler 1999, 30; Sedgwick 1990, 31–32).<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, in what becomes a challenge to sexuality discourse and the connection between sexuality and gender identity, Beatriz does not come to accept a specifically lesbian sense of self, but rather an open sense of self; she attempts to exist in ambiguity, expressing a desire for people as individuals rather than as gendered beings. Indeed, the critical tendency to label *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* as a lesbian novel because of Beatriz’s attraction to Mónica and Cat (see Urioste 2000, Martín Armas 2006, Vitorino Ceia 2006, and Martín 2001, among others) in effect limits the transgressive potential of the work and denies the very strong implications of Beatriz’s love triangle and experience of desire throughout the text. Indeed, one of the most daring aspects of this narrative is that it demands that the reader consider female desire completely outside of a binary paradigm, whether heterosexual or lesbian.

To be clear, *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* does not privilege lesbian desire over any other kind of sexual preference. The novel's forwardness in describing Beatriz's sensual pleasure in her lovers' embraces, including her attraction to women, is not simply a matter of negating heteronormative hierarchies, nor is it an attempt to reify female desire to the exclusion or derision of male desire. In her article "Erotic Fiction by Women for Women?: The Pleasures of Post-Feminist Heterosexuality," Esther Sonnet maintains that in reading erotic fiction that focuses specifically on female desire criticism must escape the "heterocentric" viewpoint of a binary pleasure principle. According to Sonnet, we must consider that "positionings for pleasure within written erotica may invoke a multiplicity of mobile and transient subjectivities which cannot be subsumed by the uni-dimensional power structure of *gender-defined* heterosexuality" (Sonnet 1999, 183; italics in original). A multiplicity of this kind is precisely what is embodied in the character of Beatriz. Her desire cannot be defined as specifically lesbian vis-à-vis a heterosexual paradigm of normative discourse because her desire functions precisely as a rejection of the power structure of normative discourse, and, within that discourse, of the "ghettoization" of so-called "deviant" sexualities. Her desire specifically defies a lesbian label, a label of active, or a label of passive, reaching beyond these structurally limiting markers and pushing the boundaries of normativity.

When describing her sexual relationship with her girlfriend Cat, Beatriz uses a combination of language that expresses an ebb and flow of activity, conjuring images of both receiving and advancing:

Deslizándose en mi búsqueda, chocaba en lo oscuro, de pronto, y yo sentía su piel en contacto con la mía. Brotaban chispas eléctricas. Ella susurraba arrastrando las palabras con su voz anaranjada y me contaba las cosas que iba a hacer conmigo.... Y entonces sentía como entraba en mí, un ataque luminoso que alumbraba las sábanas.... Era como si yo tuviera una microcámara en las yemas de mis dedos, que me permitiera ver su interior. Avanzaba, la atravesaba.... Yo estaba en ella, y ella en mí. (Etxebarria 1998, 51–52)

Sliding around in search of me, she crashed in the dark, suddenly, and I felt her skin in contact with mine. Electric sparks burst. She murmured crawling words with her orange voice and told me the things that she was going to do with me.... And then I felt how she entered me, a luminous attack that lit up the sheets.... It was as if I had a micro camera on the tips of my fingers that allowed me to see her inside. I advanced, I entered her.... I was in her, and she in me.

In her experience of sex and pleasure with her female lover, Beatriz here is both the object and the subject of their interaction. She waits for her lover's touch, listens as Cat expresses her desire, allows herself to be "attacked," and yet also enters into her lover, examines her minutely with her fingertips, and traverses the barriers of her body, desires her actively. It is an electric experience, an electric desire. In other words, the kind of female desire inscribed in the novel through Beatriz takes on many layers of meaning and is not a simple reversal of the dichotomy of masculine and feminine, activity and passivity. It is instead an erasure of the hierarchy of power that is given to one desiring party over another within such a paradigm, which achieves its aim by attributing active and passive characteristics to Beatriz's desire to the point that they are simultaneous and inseparable.

Female desire in *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* is therefore expressed as an expansion of limits that creates an alternative conceptualization of desire, challenging the binaries of heterosexual/homosexual as well as active/passive forms of passion. Beatriz's lust at times takes the form of a "ritmo salvaje" (savage rhythm) (Etxebarria 1998, 216) and at others she offers no resistance, telling herself to "*Go with the flow*" (204; italics and English in original). Sexual craving gives her the potential for agency in the way that she embodies it and makes it her own. When describing her relationship with Ralph, she asserts authority

over both her desire and the sexual act itself. She says, “Académicamente hablando, debería escribir que cuando hacía el amor con Ralph era él el que me poseía, el que me tomaba. Sin embargo era yo quien lo hacía, era yo quien le acogía en mi interior, porque él entraba en mí” (Academically speaking, I should write that when I made love with Ralph it was he that possessed me, the one who took me. But it was I that did it, I was the one who took him in my interior, because he entered me) (Etxebarria 1998, 214–15). In this way Beatriz subverts the traditional hierarchical image of coitus, which attributes social characteristics of masculine activity and female passivity to sexualized body parts. Beatriz takes hold of her own sexuality and agency even in a heterosexual coupling, thereby rejecting notions of female desire as inherently passive and breaking with the notion of an immutable and essentially feminine way of desiring. In so doing, she gains a new awareness of her self and body: “El sexo me ofrecía una clara conciencia de mí misma, desde la distancia, como si fuera otra” (Sex offered me a clear awareness of myself, from a distance, as if I were someone else) (Etxebarria 1998, 221).

Ironically, however, in coming into her body by means of a multiple-partner sexuality that is neither solely lesbian nor heterosexual, Beatriz finds herself and her sexual physicality precisely at the point where her identity becomes socially ambiguous, unrecognizable within the terms of normative discourse. This ambiguity casts a shadow of doubt over the viability of her identity, since the struggle to find agency that develops in such an ambiguous way can threaten the very existence and livability of a subject’s life (Butler 2004, 3).<sup>6</sup> As Beatriz herself admits, her desire does not fit within any recognizable classification of sexuality or gender. She states that from the moment she began to have two lovers, “mi corazón se convirtió en algo borroso, indefinible, indescifrable. Porque si me hubieran preguntado en ese momento si yo era lesbiana o si era heterosexual, e incluso si era bisexual, que parecía la respuesta más convincente, no hubiera sabido qué responder” (my heart turned into something blurry, undefined, indecipherable. Because if they had asked me in that moment if I were lesbian or heterosexual, and even if I were bisexual, which seemed the most convincing answer, I wouldn’t have known how to respond) (Etxebarria 1998, 221). Later she questions the binary classification of these two sexual worlds, asking, “¿Sólo hay dos? ¿Y dónde se supone entonces que resido yo?” (Are there only two? And where is it supposed that I reside?) (Etxebarria 1998, 221). Such a challenge that Beatriz makes to a binary notion of sexuality and gender performativity is a form of what J. Jack Halberstam calls “gaga feminism,” meaning a feminism that “grapples with what cannot yet be pronounced and what still takes the form of gibberish, as we wait for new social forms to give our gaga babbling meaning” (Halberstam 2012, xxv).<sup>7</sup> Halberstam asks: “what if sexual orientation could also be read as less fixed, less determined, more negotiated and fluid?” (9). In the character of Beatriz we can see an answer to this question; she refuses to be defined by the parameters of sexuality labels, hinting with her rhetorical question that sexuality and desire should be more open-ended. In this way, female desire as inscribed in the character of Beatriz becomes much more than an appropriation of both active and passive characteristics; it is expressed as fluid, moving beyond the dichotomies that are presumed in normative social structures and language.

Certainly, at the end of the novel Beatriz finally wants to commit to a lasting relationship with Cat, who is painted as a positive complement to Beatriz; nonetheless, it is not because Cat is a woman that Beatriz wants to be with her. To put it plainly, the establishment of a fixed lesbian identity does not mark Beatriz’s coming of age, as though her experiences have been leading her to some kind of coming out. Her attraction to Cat has never been because Beatriz was specifically looking for a lesbian partner, but rather because of Cat’s personal qualities. As a lesbian couple, they are not painted as a euphoric or idyllic pair that should supplant a heterosexual couple in some idealized gender utopia. They are connected by a mutual desire,

by a “chemical” connection that is the fundamental driving force in the novel. Nevertheless, Beatriz adores Cat, “No por su belleza ni por su sentido del humor, sino, básicamente, porque sabía que ella era una buena persona, quizá la primera persona auténticamente plena de bondad que había conocido en la vida” (Not for her beauty or her sense of humor, but, basically, because I knew that she was a good person, maybe the first person authentically filled with goodness that I had met in life) (Etxebarria 1998, 179–80).

Indeed, Beatriz constantly reminds the reader that she does not have set sexual preferences one way or the other, that though she had never “gone to bed” with a man before dating Cat, this was due to a lack of opportunity rather than a profound conviction against it (Etxebarria 1998, 47). She sees Cat’s resolve to only ever sleep with lesbians who had never been with a man and who were never attracted to men as absurd and unnecessarily drastic (Etxebarria 1998, 46). Beatriz’s decision to go to the lesbian bar where she met Cat was based on the desire to be free from the aggressive advances of unknown men rather than on specifically looking for a lesbian lover. She makes it very clear: “No iba buscando una chica, no fui allí porque me sintiera lesbiana. Sólo buscaba una cerveza y un poco de música” (I didn’t go looking for a girl, I didn’t go there because I felt lesbian. I was only looking for a beer and a little bit of music) (Etxebarria 1998, 25). After being the victim of three attempted rapes in the last fateful week that she spends with Mónica in Madrid, Beatriz realizes that her mother’s warnings that a woman should not go alone to a bar are true, even in the purportedly postfeminist culture where women are supposed to be treated with equal respect, because men have not changed much since her mother’s youth (Etxebarria 1998, 25). In other words, Beatriz realizes that gender and power are still constructed as an unequal hierarchy wherein women are seen as potential targets of men’s aggression. She decides to go to a bar without men, not because she is against being with men, but in order to avoid the social trouble that being a single woman in a public space has always caused her (Etxebarria 1998, 25).

Even Beatriz’s obsessions with her adolescent crush and best friend Mónica are not because Mónica is female but because of what she represents to Beatriz, namely, an ally in a lonely world who seems to understand her. Beatriz assures the reader that she has always been attracted to Mónica because she is vivacious, different, charismatic, and interesting. Underscoring the point that the gender of her object of desire is irrelevant, she declares that her desire for Mónica “no se reducía a un término tan simple como que a mí me gustaran o no las mujeres. Me gustaba ella. Ella, sólo ella, reconocible en medio de este monstruoso criptograma cuántico que es el universo. Y si hubiera sido un hombre, me habría gustado también” (it could not be reduced to terms as simple as that I liked or didn’t like women. I liked her. Her, only her, recognizable in this monstrous quantum cryptogram that is the universe. And if she had been a man I would have liked her too) (Etxebarria 1998, 190–91).

For Beatriz, then, the gender, sex, and physical form of the object of desire are irrelevant; the body of the desired one is simply a medium, a way for Beatriz to connect or unite with the Other and to experience the physical fulfillment of her desire. As Beatriz declares, “La mujer que amó a Ralph era la misma que amó a Cat y sé que será difícil comprender, para quien no lo haya vivido, que amó del mismo modo al uno que a la otra. Que no hubo grandes diferencias en lo que hacíamos. Que la fisiología no determinó nunca la mecánica amorosa. Que yo nací persona, y amé a personas” (The woman who loved Ralph was the same as the one who loved Cat and I know that it will be difficult to understand, for someone who hasn’t lived it, that she loved the one and the other in the same way. That there were no great differences in what we did. That physiology never determined the mechanics of love. That I was born a person, and I loved people) (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Indeed, Beatriz’s desire for multiple sexual partners adds another dimension to the representation of female desire in the novel. It defies the normative expectation of monogamy, as does

the fact that Beatriz feels no self-recrimination for it. Her need to keep it a secret is more for fear of others' judgments than because of any qualms of her own. She gets something from both of her partners; with Cat, Beatriz experiences desire as an experience of melting, which turns her into "átomos minúsculos" (miniscule atoms), whereas with Ralph her desire is a process of synchronization, control, and rhythm that gives her the awareness at the macro level of "la maravilla de mi propio cuerpo tenso" (the marvel of my own tense body) (Etxebarria 1998, 215–16). Her experiences with both lovers give her a never before enjoyed sense of happiness, a way to close the gap in the search for wholeness, even as it places her outside the realm of social normativity and signification.

Beatriz comes to the realization that she must accept who she is before she can be a healthy being who is part of a couple, because "el tiempo nos ofrece sólo dos opciones: o asumir lo que somos o abandonar" (time offers us only two options: either become or abandon who we are) (Etxebarria 1998, 265). This acceptance does not constitute settling into a fixed lesbian or bisexual identity; quite the opposite. Throughout the novel it is the incongruity of her "strangeness," the fact that she is a "chica rara" (strange girl) who does not fit into any preconceived mold of femininity or sexuality, that has been causing her much angst. She has tried unsuccessfully to hide her difference, yet that difference consists not in her being a lesbian but precisely in the fact that her desire has no name. Now, at the end of the novel, she comes to accept herself as a "chica rara" and to recognize what she is looking for in the object of her desire and affection. She states, "Ahora sólo espero renacer de mis cenizas y disfrutar de ciertas brasas de pasión, ... el calor conocido de los labios y la serenidad tantos días encontrada en unos ojos en los que ya no brillan ni la ansiedad ni el deseo excesivos.... La paz, a fin de cuentas. O el amor" (Now I only hope to be reborn from my ashes and enjoy certain embers of passion, ... the known heat of lips and the serenity found so many days in eyes in which there no longer shines excessive anxiety or excessive desire.... Peace, after all. Or love) (Etxebarria 1998, 256). Invoking the image of the phoenix, Beatriz aims to rise from the ashes of the traumatic experiences of her past and move forward. The phoenix implies the notion of constant renewal, of the cyclical destruction of the old self and the rebirth of the new. Contextualized as it is, this image reinforces Beatriz's conceptualization of the self as mutable and in a perpetual state of transformation. She has realized that she is looking for intimacy, peace, love, and desire, but it must be noted that this specific kind of desire is, from Beatriz's perspective, gender-free.

Erotic desire, for Beatriz, is the medium through which she can conduct the search for a new identity outside the realm of the definitions of normative discourse. It is a longing to return to an imagined pre-gendered state, to fill the void left by being forced out of an imagined equilibrium of androgyny that existed in her mind at some point before birth. She feels split into an incomplete gender, imperfect because it is limited by social norms and regulations that do not allow for a fluid expression of self and sexuality (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Beatriz's desire is in reality the craving for "la perfección de un estado primordial, un estado de fuerza y autonomía anterior a lo masculino o a lo femenino" (the perfection of a primordial state, a state of strength and autonomy before masculine or feminine) (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Her experience of femininity is problematic because she never felt that she fit in with the other little girls at school, and always had to pretend. She declares that femininity must be redefined, and implies that the essentialist notions of the feminine as attached to a body that is presented in a certain way with certain clothes are false.

The social constructions of masculine and feminine are at the root of most of the social angst and internal conflict expressed in the novel. Beatriz resists them, declaring, "No quería ser la mitad de uno" (I didn't want to be the half of a whole), a statement that refers to both the idea of being a part of a monogamous couple and to being female in a binary construction of gender (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Indeed, the expressions of

masculinity and femininity for Beatriz are seen as existing on a sliding scale. Rather than being a question of essential characteristics, Beatriz declares that it is all a question of degree, that there are an infinite variety of “matices de gris” (shades of gray) (Etxebarria 1998, 137). At the same time, she senses the restricting reality of normative discourse that attempts to break the world into two. She says, “Sentía una profunda nostalgia de un ideal que llevaba dentro, quizá más inexistente que perdido, y creo que buscaba la Totalidad a través del sexo, añorando dolorosamente una reunificación que sabía de partida imposible, mero deseo de fusión” (I felt a profound nostalgia for an ideal that I carried inside, perhaps more in-existent than lost, and I think I looked for Totality through sex, painfully missing a reunification that I knew from the outset was impossible, mere desire for fusion) (Etxebarria 1998, 215). Her sexual desire, then, is an attempt to reconcile this division, to reach a place of infinite possibility within herself.

The body becomes the problematic site wherein this search for totality plays out. Beatriz’s body has been a site of discord and discontent, from the violence that she has received at the hands of her father to the self-inflicted pangs of hunger as she engages in a regimen of anorexia. As Jessica A. Folkart indicates, the bodies in this text are attached to a notion of internal and external exile and alienation within a cold world, represented by the metaphor of space that is alluded to in the title of the novel and the constant references to celestial bodies, satellites, and outer space (Folkart 2004, 45). Folkart uses the ideas of Elaine Scarry and her crucial work *The Body in Pain*, wherein Scarry discusses the way pain dehumanizes individuals, as well as the manner in which discourse can objectify that pain. Discourse has the potential to give a subject the ability to share painful experiences with others and hence achieve some modicum of healing. From this perspective, then, Beatriz’s narration of the metaphorical and literal pain of her past is a cathartic experience. In Folkart’s view, the act of telling creates a stable object, the narration of past memories, through which Beatriz can measure herself as a subject by means of distancing herself from those recollections. In this way, Beatriz gains an identity and “becomes a body that talks as she struggles to create cohesive intimacy, surmount spatial chasms, and adjust her perspective to comprehend the other bodies that drift within her atmosphere” (Folkart 2004, 45).

Yet the body is not only a site of pain for Beatriz, but also a place of transformation, mutability, and of course sexual desire, although the latter is intimately connected to the search for connection with other people who surround her. The body for Beatriz is a space that is at once a personal site for self-definition, the border between the self and the world, and the site that marks the confining social constructions of femininity she finds so detrimentally limiting and pointless. For this reason, she attempts to deny the transformation of her body from the flat angles of girlhood to the matured curves of adult womanhood through fasting. Her anorexia gives her a “placer del rechazo” (pleasure of rejection) because, as she herself says, “el ayuno constituía una prolongada resistencia al cambio, el único medio que yo imaginaba para mantener la dignidad que tenía de niña y que perdería como mujer. No quería ser mujer” (fasting constituted a prolonged resistance to change, the only way that I imagined to maintain the dignity that I had as a girl and would lose as a woman. I didn’t want to be a woman) (Etxebarria 1998, 36). Her refusal to eat and her need to remain thin are a part of her struggle against a system that treats women as second class, with less dignity than a child. As Everly notes, the body in *Beatriz* is used to interrogate “a gender system that has in fact become outdated” by emphasizing the “impossibility of identity residing in the body or in its performative function” and in the way that the body’s shaky identification “questions gender as a legitimate device in sociological relationships” (Everly 2001, 174). Beatriz’s body becomes a site of this resistance, a place to enact the desire to break free from the constraints placed upon it by normative discourse.

This is done precisely through Beatriz’s attempts to mold an androgynous body for herself. While on the

one hand her body is her means to express and experience her desire for sexual fulfillment, it is also a way for her to attempt to realize her desire for a pregendered self, a self that has not been socialized in a detrimental way, through the process of changing her physical form. In point of fact, for Beatriz the androgynous body is “la visión más erótica” (the most erotic vision) that she has ever seen, a statement that underscores yet again the overarching message of the narrative as Beatriz comes of age, namely, that the ideal body and the ideal representation of desire are genderless, without socially constructed containment (Etxebarria 1998, 35). I would take Everly’s argument one step further, in that in my view it is not simply the body but rather desire acting through the body that drives this attempt to construct a pregendered or ambiguously gendered state. The body acts as a medium, a tool, for the redefinition of a desire that challenges gender norms and the consequent expectations of heteronormative sexuality.

It must be noted, however, that the objects of Beatriz’s desire are coded as masculine (Ralph) and feminine (Cat, Mónica). While Beatriz confounds her labeled gender and disconnects it from her desire, the people who are her love-sex interests (Cat, Mónica, and Ralph) still function within the system of normative expectations as to how heterosexual and homosexual masculinity and femininity are delineated. This is not some kind of oversight in the novel, but rather a device that serves to outline even more clearly that Beatriz exists within a gendered social structure, which will not accept her as non-gendered, and that demonstrates her liminality in relation to this structure. Nevertheless, the transformative and transgressive aspects of Beatriz’s attraction to and behavior with Cat and Ralph, and her cognitive recognition that she does not fit, lie in her constant refusal to perform or cite the normative expectations of her gender and its supposedly correlated desire.

In other words, Beatriz can neither fit into nor comprehend compulsory heterosexuality and its dictated connection to gender performance. The “blurriness” of her desire illustrates precisely the constructed nature of these interwoven institutions. Then again, in her refusal to adhere to culturally coded forms of femininity, and in her rejection of the heteronormative expectation that her being labeled as a female woman is supposed to entail within normative discourse (i.e., that as a “woman” she must desire “men”), she illustrates that such a connection is neither natural nor all-encompassing. Gender and desire turn out to be disconnected from each other in Beatriz’s performance, as is any notion of a specific box into which that desire can fit.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Beatriz’s love interests and the world around her do remain within a heteronormative framework, Beatriz’s refusal to define herself as heterosexual, homosexual, or even bisexual attempts, not to replace gender and sexuality with some utopian universal ideal, but rather to negotiate a less fixed version of gendered, heteronormative society through what I call a mis-citation of normative expectations of her desire. Beatriz’s understanding of her gender performance and the fluid manner in which her desire both fits and does not fit within this performance produce precisely this kind of marginal and ambiguous expression that is a new, unnamed form.

This reconceptualization of a female desire that defies normative conceptualizations of sexuality, whether hetero- or homosexual, marks the way in which *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* inscribes a female desire that is inherently a mis-citation of gender and sexual norms. Recalling the idea that the gender and sexuality of a person are created through the constant citation or “regulated process of repetition” in the “performance” of gender and heteronormative desire (Butler 1999, 185), the inscription of female desire in Beatriz can be seen as a mis-citation of these norms because of the way that it refuses or neglects to conform to their standard forms. Although it creates significant angst in the protagonist, this mis-citation acts as a moment of critical agency within and against the bounds of normative discourse that, by the end of the narrative, gives Beatriz a sense of purpose and a feeling of ownership of the act of refusing to adhere to normative

conceptualizations of female desire and femininity. What is most interesting is that mis-citation within *Beatriz* is also iterated and reiterated constantly. In effect, as Beatriz repeatedly expresses a desire that has no name and that, like her heart, is “algo borroso, indefinible, indescifrable” (something blurry, indefinable, indecipherable), she effectively performs an identity that is a mis-citation in itself (Etxebarria 1998, 221). The difficulty lies in the fact that Beatriz exists within the boundaries of normative discourse, but her desire acts in resistance to those limits, creating a new space through the agency of desiring. Beatriz’s desire pushes the margins not only of normative concepts of desire but also non-normative ones, creating the potential for an ambiguous concept of female desire that defies concrete classification.

Hence *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* is a text that interrogates normative conceptualizations of female desire and critiques the ideas of femininity, masculinity, and gender roles in general in the context of a society that is postfeminist in the negative sense, a society blind to the inequalities that exist in the established gender binary. It is not just that Beatriz is sometimes active and sometimes passive in her desire, or rather, it is not only that she is both active and passive, but instead that the expression of desire in Beatriz as a female desiring subject is not presented in terms of a duality but rather in terms of a flowing affect that knows neither gender nor boundaries. Desire is not to be limited to a gender, nor to a specific box of femininity, masculinity, or even androgyny. It is presented as a highly distinctive experience of sensuality and longing, and is inevitably blended with self-identity and the development of an adult individuality. The transgressive characteristic of Etxebarria’s inscription of desire through the character of Beatriz resides in the fact that the “package” no longer matters, the desire is not defined in terms of the desired object’s gender, which in normative terms is what determines the sexuality and therefore the gendered identity of the desiring subject.

By refusing to accept a single sexuality, the character of Beatriz breaks new ground in the literary conceptualization of female desire. As Vanessa Vitorino Ceia argues, *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, along with the rest of Etxebarria’s work, rejects binary gender categories not because they do not exist but rather because they do not represent the individuality of any person (Vitorino Ceia 2006, 9). Such conceptualizations of sexuality, gender, and desire are supported by Etxebarria’s *La Eva futura/La letra futura*. Etxebarria’s feminist essays, her presentation of sex and desire in *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes*, and her unmasking of the inner workings of cultural production through a conscious use of the elements of popular culture and consumerism, make her a key author for understanding the discourses of sexuality circulating at the end of the twentieth century. Beatriz strives for gender anonymity, which she sees as “la última transgresión” (the ultimate transgression) (Etxebarria 1998, 214). The conceptualization of gender and desire as fluid categories, as presented in Etxebarria’s work, creates a goal of desire that is free to choose its object regardless of gender. In this way, Beatriz rejects the negative version of the postfeminist female subject who is co-opted into accepting an unequal sexual contract. Instead, the character of Beatriz points in the direction of the other side of this kind of postfeminism by inscribing a female desire that transgresses the boundaries of that contract. In the end, it is the goal of an open and unbounded desire that constitutes the true ultimate transgression of Lucía Etxebarria’s writings.

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## Notes

1. Etxebarria’s first novel, *Amor, curiosidad, prozac y dudas*, published in 1996 and later made into a motion picture, established her interest in the question of femininity and explored different “models” of women—housewife, busi-

ness executive, free-spirited party girl—all within an end-of-the-century ambience of ambivalence, despair, and apathy. In *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* this sensibility is further developed, and Beatriz becomes a character that breaks the mold, unable to adhere to any of the types of femininity and sexuality offered to her in society, as discussed below.

2. All translations from Spanish to English are mine.

3. Importantly, the labeling of *Beatriz y los cuerpos celestes* as purely lesbian literature is too simple a classification, even if the novel did prompt an increase in the publication of such literature in Spain, because Beatriz confounds both homosexual and heterosexual definitions of gender and sexuality, as this article discusses.

4. As Etxebarria states, “Si esta juventud no parece mostrar excesivo interés por el mundo que les rodea, puede que sea porque el mundo que les rodea en nada les tiene en cuenta.... Esta generación se ha encontrado con un mundo en el que las antiguas ideologías de izquierdas, tras el fracaso de los regímenes comunistas, se han revelado ineficaces, mientras que el capitalismo ha dejado de significar la promesa de un desarrollo potencial” (If this youth does not seem to demonstrate excessive interest in the world around them, it could be because the world around them pays them no attention.... This generation has found itself in a world in which the old leftist ideologies, following the failure of the communist regimes, have revealed themselves to be ineffectual, while capitalism has ceased to signify the promise of a potential development) (Etxebarria 2007, 127–28).

5. As Judith Butler argues, “The institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire” (Butler 1999, 30). For her part, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick illustrates how our notions of homo- and heterosexuality are necessarily based on a binary notion of gender, which is blind to any forms of gender or sexuality that do not fit this binary (Sedgwick 1990, 31).

6. Butler describes the social experience of an ambiguous subject, stating, “As a result the ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the ‘I’ becomes to a certain extent unknowable, threatened with unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this ‘I’ fully recognizable” (Butler 2004, 3).

7. Halberstam develops the theory of “gaga feminism” inspired by the gender-queer performances of the extremely famous and popular American music artist of the early twenty-first century known as Lady Gaga. Halberstam states that “gaga feminism” is not a mere close reading of Lady Gaga’s gender-bending public displays but rather “uses the meteoric rise to fame of Lady Gaga to hint at emerging formulations of a gender politics of a new generation. This feminism is invested in innovative deployments of femininity and finds them to be well represented by pop performances characterized by their excess, their ecstatic embrace of loss of control, and a maverick sense of bodily identity” (Halberstam 2012, xiii).

8. This disconnection illustrates precisely the kind of malleability of gender that Judith Butler argues must be traced in the field of gender studies. In *Undoing Gender* Butler declares, “it is important not only to understand how the terms of gender are instituted, naturalized, and established as presuppositional but to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories [is] put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable” (Butler 2004, 216).

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