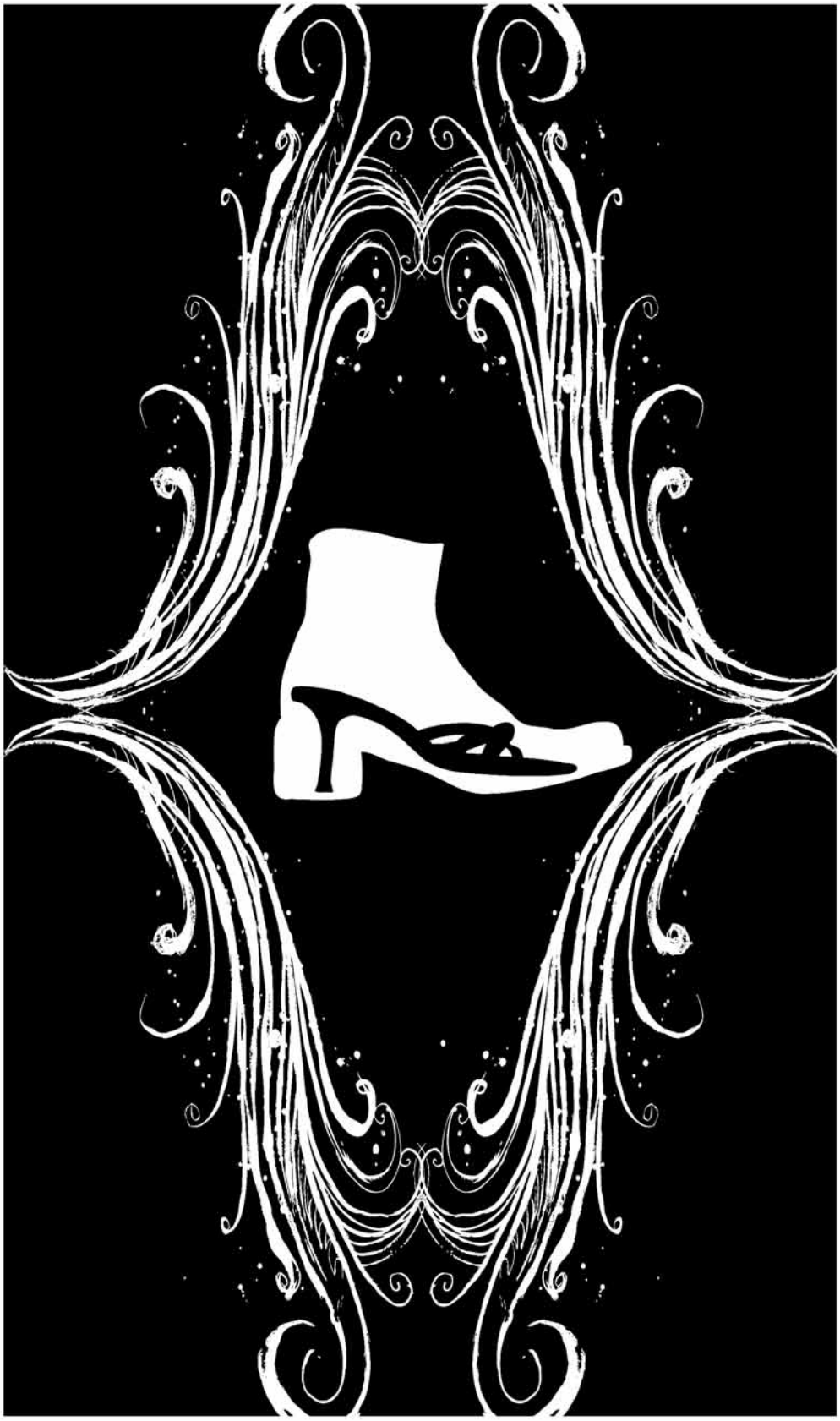

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Nationalism, states of exception, and Caribbean identities in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and "Loca la de la locura"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transformation of the idea of the nation through the spaces occupied by transvestites in Mayra Santos-Febres' novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and Manuel Ramos Otero's story "Loca la de la locura." In contrast to previous representations, which use ideals of origins to delineate the concept of the nation, the narratives of these two works claim no belonging to national borders or legal citizenship. In contrast, they challenge the concept of the nation, undermining the authority of the legal system to exclude or punish, and bringing to the forefront the protagonism of global capital that takes over nations and transnational spaces. By crossing over from one island to another, by inhabiting capital-enabled sites of transit like airports and hotels, and by occupying the spaces of prisons, mental institutions, and cemeteries, the transvestites adopt and subvert previous migrations, as well as embody the transformation of the nation in the context of the hegemony of global capital. [Key words: nation, transvestites, capital, space, migration]

his paper examines the transformation of the idea of the nation through the spaces occupied by the transvestites in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* by Mayra Santos-Febres and "Loca la de la Locura" by Manuel Ramos Otero. The way that nation and citizenship are represented in the novel and in the story break with previous representations, literary as well as cinematic, which use notions of origins and national symbols (from Antonio S. Pedreira to José Luis González, *La gran fiesta* and *El beso que me diste*) to delineate a concept of the nation. The representation of the nation in Ramos Otero's story departs from these constructions of nationalism and national identity as defining a "puertorriqueñidad" based on cultural, racial, or territorial identifications. Ramos Otero's story is a stream of consciousness narrative of a single character, Loca la de la locura, a transvestite in jail for killing her lover. As Loca reminisces on her life, she constructs a story out of fragments whose protagonists are not traditional heroes or models whose monuments help create a national imaginary, but instead dead people who, in life, were socially marginalized and "excluded"—her mother and her former lover Nene Lindo. Loca privileges spaces generally marginalized by the logic of the nation (the prison and the mental institution) or with an ambiguous relationship to that logic (the cemetery)—focusing on the idea of solitude and denying the possibility for the creation of a community.

In contrast, Santos-Febres' novel takes place between two islands, Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, with New York as a third space included in the Caribbean enclave. It tells the story of Sirena and Martha, two Puerto Rican transvestites on their way to the Dominican Republic with the intention of selling Sirena's show. Sirena, who is underage and cannot be a star in Puerto Rico, escapes with Hugo Graubel to stage a private show in his house, and ultimately decides to run away again instead of returning with Martha. The narrative does not claim a belonging to national limits or to legal citizenship. Instead, it challenges the concept of a stable, fixed nation, parodying characteristics such as the legal system which, as an institution representative of the nation-state, no longer has the power to exclude or to punish, and situating the plot in spaces such as hotels and airplanes, which imply movement, instability, transition, a constant flow of people and capital, capital that reigns over nations and transnational spaces. In this sense, the novel offers a critique of the alienation brought about in the context of the increasing dominance of international capital—which, ironically, simultaneously connects and distances people and nations that enter its flow.

The fact that it is a transvestite who occupies these spaces in Ramos Otero's story and in Santos Febres' book alludes not only to the transformation of the concept of the nation, and of the independence/colonialism debate, but also to the way in which capital and transnational channels (whose vehicles here are the transvestites) adopt and subvert previous, already familiar migrations.

Puerto Rico and nationalism

One cannot analyze the construction and the representation of the nation in Puerto Rican cultural production without discussing the complex relationship that the island has had with colonialism, independence, and the concept of the nation. Since the US military invasion in 1898, Puerto Rico's experience with nationalism has in great measure been defined through the island's relationship to the United States, through the "sharp ideological split between statehood and nationality, or, to put it in other words, between citizenship and identity" (Duany 133), and through the neocolonial position in which it finds itself, as Estado Libre Asociado, with respect to the metropolis. Crucial in this discussion is the politics of "cultural nationalism," which certain critics have called a "postcolonial arrangement" (Duany 127) as regards the island's status. On the one hand, cultural nationalism affirms the conviction that "the nation was 'the natural space' in which a people's identity could flourish in the contemporary world, [where] it was possible to develop a strong, original and well-defined personality without resorting to political nationalism" (Duany 126). On the other hand, cultural nationalism has also been criticized for denying the island political independence, for constructing the US—and the millions of Puerto Ricans in the US—as an "other," as well as for practicing a "política del olvido" (Díaz-Quiñones 137), which excluded the exiled from the national imaginary and which constructed a monolingual nation that fails to represent the languages and nuances of the Spanish spoken in Puerto Rico. In this sense, an analysis of the construction and the representation of nationalism has to take into consideration the evolution of the intensity of this debate, and the way that it has opened up other possibilities, beyond the dichotomy of statehood and independence—namely, the idea that there are other alliances that Puerto Ricans on the island could create, either in the context of a Caribbean regionalism or with Puerto Ricans in the US, in the context of the constant back-and-forth movement of first- and second-generation Puerto Ricans between the island and the metropolis. The political possibilities of these alliances have been explored by Puerto Rican authors of the past 40 years, above all Ana Lydia Vega and José Luis González. More recently, writers like Mayra Santos-Febres have proposed reinterpretations of these possibilities in the context of the intensification and the omnipresence of global capital and the formation of new lines of trans-Caribbean migration.

"Loca la de la locura" and bare life in the state of exception

While the primary setting of Ramos Otero's story is the prison cell, its larger context is that of the nation and its relation to power and violence. Even though the state (in this case, the postcolonial state) is not part of the narrative, it is invisible and present—transparent in its presence—through the way it exercises violence to exclude those that stand outside the "rationality specific to the art of governing states" (Foucault 406). In his discussion of the relation of the state to order and violence, Foucault talks about the "reason of state"; "'A certain political consideration required of all public matters, councils and projects, whose only aim is the state's preservation, expansion and felicity.' Note those words: the state's preservation, the state's expansion and the state's felicity—'to which end, the easiest and the promptest means are to be employed'" (406). The reason of state, he believes, employs a "very specific set of techniques of government [which is] the police" (405). In Foucault's interpretation, the basic object of the police is "life" —"The indispensable, the useful and the superfluous: those are the three types of

things that we need, or that we can use in our lives. That people survive, that people live, that people do even better than just survive or live: that is exactly what the police have to ensure" (Foucault 415). In this sense, he recognizes and emphasizes the police's biopolitical function of ordering life and ensuring order within the territorial limits of the state

The police, however, have an ambivalent function—on the one hand, that of ordering people's existence and socializing them as citizens under the same law of the state, and on the other hand, that of preserving the reason of the state within the circle of its own logic through violence that serves the controlling power of the nation-state. According to Foucault,

> the true object of the police becomes, at the end of the eighteenth century, the population; or, in other words, the state has essentially to take care of men as a population. It wields its power over living beings as living beings, and its politics, therefore, has to be a biopolitics. Since the population is nothing more than what the state takes care of for its own sake, of course, the state is entitled to slaughter it, if necessary. So the reverse of biopolitics is thanatopolitics (Foucault 416).

This thanatopolitics, or politics of death, is part of what recent political thought on the nation has claimed—namely, the "specialization and concentration of order maintenance" as the major function of the state (Gellner 54). In order to exercise this function, the state recurs to institutional violence delegated by the police. In Gellner's discussion of Max Weber's influential theory, the state is seen as

> that agency within society that possesses the monopoly of legitimate violence. [...] in well-ordered societies, [...] private or sectional violence is illegitimate. Conflict as such is not illegitimate, but it cannot rightfully be resolved by private or sectional violence. Violence may be applied only by the central political authority, and those to whom it delegates this right. Among the various sanctions of the maintenance of order, the ultimate one—force—may be applied only by one special, clearly identified, and well-centralized disciplined agency within society. That agency or group of agencies is the state (Gellner 53–4).

Thus, the state is both the guardian (ideally) of life and the population's well-being, and the carrier of the self-bestowed right of legitimate violence, for the benefit of its own reaffirmation and reproduction. Institutions like the police and spaces like the prison are the technologies that the state uses to keep order and control and contain the population so as to affirm its own existence. In the context of colonialism, on the other hand, the metropolitan state's institutional apparatus extends its control to the colonies, imposing limits on the extent to which the colonized can control their social and political organizations and daily life. The colonial (or, in the case of Puerto Rico the neocolonial) state polices the legal and institutional system, and through that, the construction of various identities and identifications composing the societies that these systems order—race, sexuality, and gender, among others.

Ramos Otero's story "Loca la de la locura" is imbued with this kind of state-sanctioned violence. The story's protagonist and only diegetic character is Loca la de la locura, a transvestite imprisoned for killing her lover. Her imprisonment marks her as an object of state control, as someone outside the law. However, the story of her life that she tells suggests that she was an excluded and marginalized subject even before she went to prison. A transvestite who is hardly the ideal "citizen" in the official imaginary of the state, she comes from the countryside, from Hormigueros, to the city, only to find herself in el Club Medianoche where she meets Nene Lindo and where "tal vez por el bolero es que todo comienza" (233)—the seduction, the disillusionment, the crime. Before prison, Loca la de la locura seems to be in an "internal exile [...] defined as isolation, alienation, deprivation of means of production and communication, exclusion from public life" (Naficy 123).

Loca's internal exile is symbolized by the spaces that she inhabits before she goes to jail—the semi-underground bars and clubs where what awaits her and what takes over her is violence. As much as these spaces can be sites of identity formation and expression, they are also spaces marginalized by the state, spaces that exemplify police control and state-sanctioned violence. Thus, Loca's isolation and subjection to violence and control is effectuated on two levels—the violence inflicted by Nene Lindo and the control and marginalization in the context of the state.

In this sense, the imprisonment is just another level of control in a society in which the transvestite already felt marginalized and excluded. In her hallucinatory stream-of-consciousness narrative she does not explicitly say why she killed Nene Lindo, but the readers understand that it was an "asesinato pasional, público" (Ramos Otero 238), with an explanation as uncertain as,

> ¿Por qué lo hice? Si lo supiera, pero no lo sé. El miedo a quedarme calva cuando dejaron de usarse las pelucas, los juanetes que deformaron mis pies de gacela [...], las arrugas y las patas de gallo que no quisieron escuchar los consejos humectantes de Helena Rubinstein, tuvieron que ver con eso. [...] Que me volvía vieja como el bolero y él más vigoroso que la salsa (Ramos Otero 237–8).

Her fear of old age and solitude bring her to do something that will put her in prison, an act that provokes the violence of the state, and yet only seems to make her exclusion literal, spatial, as opposed to internal, in an illusory state of freedom. In this sense, the story exposes the mechanisms of state control that are not confined to, but culminate with the police and the space of the prison cell.

On the one hand, the murder is an act of liberation from what Loca sees as the confines of her own body, an act the motivation of which is embedded in the transvestite's corporeal identification. Through Nene Lindo's murder, "el travestí toma conciencia y se vuelve revolucionario(a)" (Cruz-Malavé, "Para Virar" 259), the violent death is a liberation from the reflection of herself that she sees in him, the destruction of the transvestite's body that the passage of time causes, and the striking contrast (whether real or melodramatic and effectuated through Loca's imagination and perception) with Nene Lindo's vigorous body. It is important to note here that the use of melodrama in the tone and in the cultural references to telenovelas and popular performers acts as one of the "prácticas

que [...] asumen el estereotipo e instituyen, desde él, su crítica, su resistencia" (Cruz-Malavé, "Para Virar" 259). It becomes an act of liberation for the protagonist, a form of invention and self-representation that allows the character to rationalize her actions and to attempt to resist her reduction to a passive object of state power.

On the other hand, as Cruz-Malavé again has pointed out, the murder is an act that inserts Loca's character into the national debate and ends up creating a figure that serves as "both the invocation of a national identity and its short-circuiting," an oppositional strategy "to preempt the recovery of the body for a national discourse" (Cruz-Malavé, "Toward and Art of Transvestism" 159), as a way to go beyond Loca's exclusion from the national discourse and attribute to her a kind of agency, or choice, which makes her inaccessible to that discourse.

The spaces privileged in the story and the place occupied by the transvestite are especially important in relation to the representation of nationhood and nationalism. Apart from the bars and clubs, the other spaces that Loca la de la locura talks about are the prison, the cemetery—Nene Lindo's tomb—and the mental institution where her mother died. The prison, the asylum, and the cemetery are spaces of exclusion, spaces for those who do not belong in the nation-state because they cannot participate in its reproduction—the criminals who have violated the laws, mentally disturbed people who cannot follow the "reason of the state," and, in a more complex relationship to the idea of the nation, the dead.

The space of the cemetery merits special attention in its relationship to the authority of the state and to the formation of national subjects. Benedict Anderson has theorized the meaning of the cemetery and the tribute that it pays to national heroes and unknown soldiers, and has pointed out that "void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains or immortal souls, they are nonetheless saturated with national imaginings" (Anderson 9). Philippe Ariès has further explained how that saturation enfolds. He proposes that since the end of the eighteenth century it was thought that "society is composed of both the dead and the living. The city of the dead is the obverse of the city of the living, or rather than the obverse, it is its image, its intemporal image. For the dead have gone through the moment of change, and their monuments are the visible sign of the permanence of their city" (Ariès 74). It is in the cemetery that the "tombs of heroes and great men would be venerated by the state" (73) and where the public can express its patriotism through "the cult of the dead" (75). Thus, through the creation of an imaginary space and by investing in it the sense of permanence and temporal infinity, pride, and heroism, the nation-state creates the cemetery as a space through which it can construct and perpetuate itself, its authority and legitimacy.

Upon careful examination, however, the cemetery can be seen as a space that not only upholds, but also challenges the authority and the legitimacy of the nation-state and its discourses. The silence of the dead subjects who were once disenfranchised, marginalized, and oppressed is what allows the nation-state to project a positive image of itself and to propagate a discourse of belonging and equality. As Sharon Patricia Holland claims, "the nation exists precisely because the dead do not speak or because those in power believe that conversation with the dead is 'undesirable' or actually in direct opposition to the project of sustaining a working nation" (Holland 28). Since in death they are beyond the reach of the control of the mechanisms of the state, "the dead are the most intimate enemy of the changing

and growing nation. Should they rise and speak for themselves, the state would lose all right to their borrowed and/or stolen language" (28). Thus Holland goes further in the theorization of the role of the dead and the space of the cemetery in the formation of national imaginaries, proposing a connection between the dead and the marginalized as challenges to the authority of the state.

In the case of "Loca la de la locura," Nene Lindo is one of the marginalized dead whom the state does not even need to exploit. He is not a national hero whom the state needs to enhance its own authority. His silence is what the state needs in order to perpetuate its own image, at the same time marginalizing and further excluding the silent subject from the national imaginary. Loca visits the cemetery not to see the monument of a hero that a "good" national subject should identify with, but instead goes back to the memories of Nene Lindo, the subject who does not belong in the national imaginary.

The representation of space in "Loca la de la locura" is also intimately related to the perspective that Hamid Naficy proposes in his article on "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: the Independent Transnational Film Genre." Even though he focuses his analysis on cinematographic representations of nationhood, homeland, and exile, his discussion of space, transnationalism, and exile is useful when thinking about Ramos Otero's work. Naficy discusses the expression and representation of space in films made by exiled directors and authors, people who left their home country because they were forced out or because they did not find the space they needed there to think and work freely. As a Puerto Rican who left the island and moved to New York for personal and political reasons, Ramos Otero inscribes himself in the community of authors whom Naficy delineates. Transnational authors like Ramos Otero, according to Naficy, have a particularly problematic relationship with space, as a consequence of their own state of exile and exclusion—they are often unable to find a comfortable place and are subject to different forms of marginalization in the home as well as in the host country.

When discussing the traditional representation of space in Hollywood film as dichotomous—as feminine (domestic, inside, private) and masculine (public, open spaces, outside)—Naficy points out that

> Transnational filmmakers bring to their films [...] different styles of spatial inscription. In addition, they further destabilize the traditional gendered binarism of space since in transnationality the boundaries between self and other, female and male, inside and outside, homeland and hostland are blurred and most continually negotiated. Moreover, spatial configuration [...] is driven not only by structures of identification and alienation, but also by eruptions of memory and nostalgia (Naficy 128–9).

Ramos Otero's character in Loca la de la locura is the product of this kind of transnational consciousness—a transvestite who challenges the traditional gender binary of male and female, she occupies the prison cell as an "other," a marginalized subject whose body is imprisoned but whose mind goes back and forth between the past, the present, and the moment of freedom when she will leave jail. The moments when she remembers the past are marked by a number of different emotions—nostalgia, as Naficy points out, but also anger, incomprehension, bitterness, pain. These emotions find an outlet in instances

of melancholia and camp humor. On the one hand, these instances allow the character to express the intensity of her emotions through a world that she is familiar with, that of television and the telenovelas. On the other hand, the camp contained in the following words positions Loca's character alongside telenovela actresses and allows her a temporary illusionary escape from the space of the prison: "Fui a nuestra cita en la frontera. Todavía chorrea la sangre de un corazón lleno de amor. Lo esperé toda la vida. [...] Vengativa como Milagros Carrillo, seductoramente bella como Elena Montalbán lo esperé. Clavada de espinas, con más tajos en las venas que Marta Romero lo esperé" (Ramos Otero 239). These emotions of pain and bitterness, and their expression through camp identification, are triggered by the experience of imprisonment, by the solitude and the isolation that leave one with only the past to contemplate.

As Naficy again points out, "In transnational genre, it is the enclosed claustrophobic spaces, often in the form of prisons, which both express and encode the (melo)drama of transnational subjectivity" (Naficy 129). Even if the subject of the story is a Puerto Rican living in Puerto Rico, what can be read as transnational and therefore influencing this representation of space is the experience of the author, which makes him confine his character to "otherness" and to internal exile on the island that Ramos Otero himself left because he did not feel free to express his political beliefs or his sexuality. In addition to that, as Naficy points out, the contradictions and the representations of phobic (whether claustrophobic or agoraphobic) spaces in transnational authors' work is linked to the "pathology of living in modern cities [and] enclosed spaces of urban excess and commerce—from arcades to shopping malls—which engender both agoraphobia and claustrophobia and recuperate them in the service of increasing consumption" (Naficy 130). Ramos Otero's geopolitical location as an exiled author is New York, the center of capital and urban excess, which invokes those feelings of both agoraphobia and claustrophobia, of exclusion and imprisonment at the same time. In this sense, the story can be seen as interacting with the transnational positioning of its author to suggest solitude and the impossibility of location, of space, of citizenship as liberating concepts that result in solidarity and community.

This impossibility of building a community in the state of exception and internal exile is also suggested through the people with whom Loca la de la locura communicates. She is the only living character in the story, and since she is isolated in her cell, the only other human being who enters her world is the prisoner in the cell next door whom Loca listens to as he masturbates. There is no communication between them, no conversation, solidarity, exchange. The other two characters that the transvestite remembers are both dead—Nene Lindo and her mother. In this sense, the ghosts that Loca remembers are yet another mark of her exclusion and solitude—on the one hand, the impossibility of creating a community of corpses, and on the other, the state of not being included in the nation-state.

Nationalism and the challenges of a Caribbean subjectivity: *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*

Sirena Selena is situated in the context of another stage of the evolution of the nation-state, marked by the advance and increasing dominance of global capitalism, a context in which the nation-state is progressively weaker and in which a sense of nationalism is no longer the organizing force of communities. Instead of national, "imagined" communities constructed upon visions of common language and

territorial borders, and "imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6), what exists in Mayra Santos Febres' novel are "fronteras intranacionales" (Martínez San-Miguel) that people cross in order to create not communities, but rather alliances based on common interests now organized by the driving force of capital and economic power.

The state and its institutions in Santos Febres' novel don't have the extent and the normative power that they do in Ramos Oteros' story. While Ramos Otero's main character is incarcerated and her life is controlled and subjugated by the power of the state, the characters in *Sirena Selena* are not only outside the "reason of the state" but also outside the law and the state's regulatory apparatus. While in Puerto Rico, Sirena Selena is one of the abject, ousted, excluded, a citizen and yet a non-citizen. She prostitutes herself and suffers rape and violence outside the protection of the state, which would have only sent her to a state institution, "un hogar de crianza" that is nothing other than another "círculo en el infierno" (Santos-Febres 9), and where she would be exposed to yet more violence. Sirena Selena represents "bare life" in Agamben's terms, "the simple fact of living common to all living beings" (Agamben 1). The nation-state's efforts to affirm itself through the regulation of bare life thus constitute "the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, [and] the realm of bare life—which is originally at the margins of the political order —gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (Agamben 9). The young Sirena Selena refuses to turn herself in to the care of the state, yet is unable to remain "outside" a bigger system, that of global capital. Whereas, as Foucault has explained, the state has been the sovereign whose function was to exclude some and include others for the purpose of its self-affirmation (as in "Loca la de la locura"), capitalism has gone beyond the need to exclude, in order to provide space (for participation, for exploitation through work) for everybody. In this sense, it has overpowered the technologies of the state-technologies such as the police and the legal system —with regard to the individual (bare life), now citizen. Instead, it has turned that individual into a workforce that can only operate from within the system of capital.

In this sense, nationhood and the nation-state are represented in *Sirena Selena* in ways very different from those that constitute their representation in Ramos Otero's story. In the first place, while "Loca" presented a strong nation-state, in *Sirena Selena* the state is weaker and its laws powerless to prevent or to punish offenses. Laws seem to have a limited reach and, by banning certain illegal actions, only seem to be opening up the possibility for others:

> [Sirena] ya había hecho su showcito en la Crasholetta, ya les había cantado en privado a las locas más lujosas del ambiente. Pero era muy nena todavía como para ganarse contratos en los hotels de la zona turística. 'Ni mintiendo te lo dan, mi amor, que las leyes federales prohíben el child labour. ¿Tú no sabías eso? Así que mejor—le dijo su mama—, mejor nos vamos a la República Dominicana que allí no se tragan esos cuentos.' Y ahora, gracias a las leyes federales, Sirena Selena estaba al punto de convertirse en la dive del Caribe (Santos-Febres 11–2).

This evasion of the law is in fact "a relation of misrecognition [that] persists between the law and the subject it compels" (Butler 122), a subversion through appropriation, in Butler's terms, on the part of the transvestites. They do not disobey the law but interpret it as simply meaning that they have to do elsewhere what the law condemns in Puerto Rico. Martha Divine's connections in the Dominican Republic allow her to manipulate and evade the Dominican legal system as well, as the sovereign becomes not the state of exception and its system of imposing order, but instead the elite that is outside the law and that has control over the flow of capital. On her way to Hugo Graubel's house Sirena realizes that "en estas repúblicas independientes los poderosos son más impunes, más omnipotentes que en su isla" (Santos-Febres 69). As she gets into Graubel's car—and even earlier, as she gets on the airplane to go the Dominican Republic—Sirena becomes part of this flow of global capital in a way in which she had not been while living and working in Puerto Rico. She becomes part of the movement, of the transfer of transnational capital in the context of weak nation-states and national laws that only displace what they condemn.

This debilitation of the nation-state, together with the increasing dominance of the law of global capital, is suggested through the representation of national symbols and through the configuration of space in *Sirena Selena*. The novel does not discuss flags, monuments, or any other symbols of nationalism—neither of political nationalism nor of the "cultural nationalism" that, as critics like Jorge Duany have pointed out, politicians have tried to establish as the leading "nationalist" ideology in Puerto Rico. On the other hand, the spaces that the novel privileges are neither singular, nor exclusively delimited by national borders. Instead, they are connected spaces—the islands of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, with New York as a third space, a configuration of migrations and interconnected Caribbean spaces reminiscent of Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel's discussion of "fronteras intranacionales," yet more alienating and responsible for making it impossible to create a trans-Caribbean community.

The concept of nationalism and nation-state in Sirena Selena is limited to the experience of crossing borders and passing from one island to another through the space of the airport and the customs office. These are the only spaces where one is identified as a citizen and as a national subject, where national and gender identity is constructed, and where it can be questioned. Martha Divine is never as scared as she is when passing through the customs office in the Dominican Republic: "Comenzaron de nuevo las dudas. ¿Y si le notaban algo raro por las esquinas del maquillaje, y si a ella le pasaba lo que a la Maxine, que la leyeron tan pronto se bajó del 747 y le hicieron pasar vergüenza tras vergüenza en las oficinas de aduana?" (Santos-Febres 20). Thus, the institution of the nation-state solidifies and fixes identities, marginalizing and excluding the transvestite, who, because of her gender identification, cannot fully be accepted as a national subject because she transgresses the limits of what the nation-state deems acceptable and productive. However, apart from the customs offices, the other spaces in the novel are hardly marked or controlled by the nation-state. On the contrary, the raison d'être of the hotels and the private houses that the characters inhabit is the facilitation of the flow of capital, mostly through tourism and underground business operations. This is precisely Martha's reason for going to the Dominican Republic in the first place: "Iban de negocios, a ver si vendían su show a algún hotel. Sangre de empresarias" (Santos-Febres 11), and later, "bien sea en el hotel de Contreras o en otros de menor categoría, iba a vender su show, de seguro. Entonces llegaría la bonanza, el éxito,

el fin de sus agonías. Correría el dinero, dinero para su solo cuerpo, dinero para su Ángel Luminoso [...]" (Santos-Febres 19–20). Since most of the action of the novel takes place in these settings—Contreras' hotel, Hugo Graubel's house, and the beach—the capital that flows through these spaces is a factor as indispensable in the construction of nationalism as is migration and the way that the characters follow this capital. In this sense, the limited power of national laws and borders in the face of capital, the reality of the transvestites in the book and their crossing from island to island suggest "la formulación de un nuevo sujeto al que se le puede definir como 'transcaribeño,' ya que rompe con las definiciones tradicionales fijas de la nación 'puertorriqueña' o 'dominicana'" (Arroyo 41). This "sujeto transcaribeño" opens the possibility for a post-national imaginary and for a "ciudadanía que no se define por los límites de la nación" (Arroyo 49) but rather by the intranational borders within the Caribbean.

Martínez-San Miguel begins her study of cultural intersections in the Caribbean with a number of questions, one of which is especially relevant to the analysis of nationalism in *Sirena Selena*—the question of "qué impacto tiene la migración en la definición de las identidades nacionales de fines del siglo veinte" (Martínez-San Miguel 28). Given the high rate of migration between the islands of the Caribbean and a number of Caribbean enclaves in the United States, this is a fundamental problem that addresses not only the issue of national identity and memory, but also the impact of global movements (that often follow the demands of capital) on the geopolitical specificities of the Caribbean (islands). In relation to Sirena Selena, Martínez-San Miguel's idea of "fronteras intranacionales," which address "la manera de que cada una de estas comunidades [caribeñas] representa su interacción cultural con ese trasfondo caribeño que se comparte como resultado de los múltiples desplazamientos" (Martínez-San Miguel 32), is useful in analyzing the significance of Sirena's and Martha's movement from Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic.

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In *Caribe Two Ways*, Martínez-San Miguel proposes the possibility for the creation of Caribbean connections, communities, and alliances based on the continuous physical and cultural interactions between the islands. On a similar note, discussing the reality of Santos Febres' novel, Efraín Barradas suggests that "la importancia que pone la autora a las relaciones entre los personajes boricuas y dominicanos, así como la aparición de un personaje menor de origen cubano, creo que nos sirven para leer la novela, si no como una alegoría del pan-antillanismo, sí como un texto que vuelve a plantear esta comunidad y comunicación caribeñas" (Barradas 57). While this is true in the sense that the novel takes place across national borders, the reality in Santos-Febres' book problematizes the possibility of community, indicating both an approximation and an alienation between the transnational Caribbean subjects. Her characters are situated and subsumed under the reign of capital—the reason

for the trip, as well as for Sirena's escape with Hugo and then away from his house, are all motivated by the struggle to insert herself into the system of capital and benefit from it. In this context, Sirena's decision to leave Hugo and never return to Martha has a two-fold meaning. On the one hand, it can be interpreted as a political act, as a demonstration of agency, of a desire to confront and escape the network of exploitation. On the other hand, upon her escape, Sirena is lost in the city —metaphorically "lost" forever, without a trace, in a city that won't offer her more opportunities than San Juan did until days before she got on the airplane. The intranational borders in Sirena's case do not offer her the opportunity to create a community or to become part of a community in the host country, but instead provide a channel that leads her back into the seemingly irreversible stream of capital.

Another way in which the possibility of a Caribbean community in the context of the incessant and omnipresent movement of capital is problematized is through the kinds of visions that the characters in the novel express regarding other islands in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. From the point of view of the Puerto Rican Martha, Cuba is seen as a poor country outside of what she identifies as important: "quién sabe cómo la gente se entretiene de noche en Cuba, con la pobreza que hay en esas repúblicas. Allá no deben haber cines ni barras ni nada..." (Santos-Febres 34). The view from Puerto Rico regarding the Dominican Republic is equally disturbing and alienated from the reality of the country, in fact much more inserted in the flow of global capital than Sirena—and other Puerto Ricans—imagine: "No sabía que había millonarios así en la República Dominicana. En las noticias sólo se hablaba de dominicanos fugados en yola, carcomidos por la sal, o despezcuezados por los tiburrones, flotando panza arriba por el estrecho de la Mona" (Santos-Febres 109). The Dominican Republic is constructed, above all, through post-colonial economic migration and poverty. By the same token, the young Dominicans Leocadio and Migueles represent their view of Puerto Rico as an imperial sell-out, saying that Puerto Ricans

> están acostumbrados a ser gringos. ¿Tú no sabes que Puerto Rico es parte de los Estados Unidos? Allá no hay la corrupción ni la pobreza que hay aquí. Lo que sí hay es mucho crimen y un puchorrón de droga. La mayoría de los puertorriqueños son drogadictos. Por eso no trabajan. La culpa la tienen las comodidades, el tiempo sin hacer nada, porque a la gente la mantiene el gobierno para que no se subleve (Santos-Febres 199).

These generalized views of the islands from other islands express, on the one hand, the alienation that still reigns within the Caribbean, and on the other, the need for the connections and communities that Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel and Jossianna Arroyo propose in their work. While the islands in the Caribbean are just tourist sites, subject to forces that "nos obliga[n] a transformarnos, para consumo del turista, en lo que no somos o no queremos ser permanentemente. En este sentido, el turismo es un travestismo comercial y obligatorio para cualquier país que dependa de él" (Barradas 59), and while they continue to follow without caution and without question the flow of capital that translates into "un colonialismo *lite* [...] que se viste de neon" (Haesendonck 87–8), the possibility of a trans-Caribbean community and the construction of identities that operate under a regional, instead of a national or global/commercial consciousness, will remain a fantasy.

Conclusion

Mayra Santos-Febres' *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and Manuel Ramos Otero's "Loca la de la locura" present very distinct, yet powerful criticisms of nationalism and of the relationship of the subject to the nation-state. Ramos Otero writes from the "outside"—literally and metaphorically, as a Puerto Rican in New York City and as a subject that has felt excluded and has left the island, passing from internal to external exile. His character's imprisonment presupposes the controlling mechanisms of Agamben's "state of exception," and the fact that Loca is a transvestite alludes to the rigidity of the notion of citizenship and to the way that it fixes categories of belonging and exclusion based on race, ethnicity, or, as is the case here, of sexual presentation and orientation, identification, and exclusion.

On the other hand, instead of explicitly entering the debate of independence vs. colonialism, Santos-Febres' novel proposes a post-national Caribbean subjectivity. In *Sirena Selena* Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and New York are connected by airplanes, back and forth trips, and desires for wealth and fame—thus delineating a Caribbean that goes beyond national identities and emphasizes a regional subjectivity. This Caribbean subjectivity, however, has limited potential when it comes to the creation of a community, because, as imagined in the novel, this community is driven not by common or intersecting cultural and historical elements, but rather by the need to incorporate in the system of capital that makes the subject transcend national borders. Mayra Santos' novel does not take for granted this reality, but instead proposes a critique of capitalist domination and of the way that it brings together, yet alienates the Caribbean islands. In *Sirena Selena*, the transvestite embodies the experience of the flow of global capital, and at the same time represents the cultural and economic transvestism that takes place in the Caribbean under the intensification of the capitalist economic relations.

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