

Translating Queer Caribbean Localities in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*

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Sirena Selena vestida de pena by Puerto Rican author Mayra Santos-Febres enacts the narrative flow of queer bodies, capital, and desire across the Caribbean basin, creating a transnational adventure tale of longing and displacement. Set in the neighboring islands of Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, the novel presents the postcard that is travel from the vantage points of multiple points of contact. The maps of center and periphery are twisted to examine circuits of transnational exchange that complicate the discrete binaries of first world and third world, the US and Latin America. The text offers the simulacra of Caribbean culture—the sensuous seductress, the warm, lapping waters of a crystalline sea, and the nostalgic cadence of the *bolero*—alongside the violence and brutality that occupy these same imaginary localities, discourses that coexist in the feminized male body of Sirena Selena, a poor, young Puerto Rican. This essay examines both the original Spanish text by Santos-Febres, *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, and the English translation by Stephen Lytle, *Sirena Selena: A Novel*, to consider how differently imagined peripheries disrupt and engage sites of belonging and displacement for diverse readers. In the process, it attempts to pry open the folds of these interpenetrating sites of Latin American sexuality to consider how language, translation, and narration shape the formation of queer Caribbean subjectivity.

The novel opens with Selena, a fifteen-year-old singing sensation, and Miss Martha Divine, his mentor into the glam world of drag performance, leaving Puerto Rico aboard a plane en route to the Dominican Republic. The story begins after Miss Divine arranges for an audition for Selena at the Santo Domingo Hotel Conquistador, with the hope of booking an engagement at this luxury establishment. Travel in this novel occasions the possibility to shift from one subject position to another: from native to foreigner, from social insider to social outsider. Jorge Duany notes: “When people move across state borders, they enter not only a different labor market and political structure but also a new system of social stratification by class, race, ethnicity and gender” (147). In the case of Selena, we see a vivid transformation in perceived class status. For Selena, who spent his youth cleaning the homes of the wealthy alongside his grandmother and later picking up cans or men in the streets of San Juan, her experience as

exotic diva in Santo Domingo is filled with opulence.¹ If the *bolero* diva is forever torn apart by love's cruelties, she is also perpetually swaddled in sumptuousness. In fact, her intoxicating power as a diva is dependent on the performance of crippling romantic anguish in the face of *laissez-faire* luxury. Through travel and performance, the novel contrasts urban poverty in Puerto Rico with elite elegance in the Dominican Republic.

The possibilities for transformation offered by travel are appreciated fully by the young protagonist. Even as Selena and Miss Divine begin their journey toward Santo Domingo, Selena feels that this will be the first of many voyages toward self-definition: "Primer avión que coge, primera vez que brinca el charco. La segunda será a Nueva York, lo presiente. Allá a probar suerte como quien es" (9); "It's his first time flying in an airplane, his first puddle jump. The second will be to New York, he imagines. To try his luck there as who he really is" (3).² The continual shift in location is reiterated in the narrative biographies of these two characters, as each has already undergone a series of displacements: Martha from her native Honduras and Selena from the shelter of her grandmother's house in the Puerto Rican countryside to one temporary home after another on the urban streets of San Juan. Likewise, the plot unfolds through the voices of various central and marginal narrators, shifting back and forth in time and place, enacting a narrative displacement for the reader.

Travel and movement hold very different significance for these two characters, and their different relationships to geographic travel find interesting parallels in their approaches to transgender identity. Selena, the younger of the two, views travel with a giddy sense of new opportunities, a chance to "*probar suerte*"; the movement across genders is likewise seen as a chance to explore the possibilities of performative expression. Curiously, although Spanish is often represented as being the more gendered of the two languages, in this passage and its translation, the English demand for a pronoun fixes the gender position of Selena: "Allá a probar suerte como quien es" becomes "To try his luck there as who he really is." In the original Spanish text, Selena's gender, like her class position, is not represented as a core element of her identity; instead it is continually informed by social context and location. In both the Spanish original and the English translation, textual references to Selena in the form of pronouns and gendered designations are contextually based and move back and forth depending on the situation being described, a convention I adopt in this essay.

Unlike Selena, who has found a way to live creatively in the interstice of gender, Martha's gender is unequivocally female throughout the novel, a constant and unflinching element of her embodied understanding of self. For Martha Divine, who by virtue of her age and experience possesses a

greater understanding of the significance of traversing borders, the opportunities afforded by travel are mired in anxiety. Her insistence on claiming a space on one side of the gender binary thus can be understood in relation to the material significance of border patrols that regulate both gender and travel. Her experiences with the demands of geopolitical borders inform her constant vigilance in the face of a social order that punishes gender outlaws with humiliation and violence. For Martha the physical passing from one location to another, the moment of seeking entry, is saturated with dread. Take-offs and landings are thus swollen with nervous anticipation, an anxiety Martha first articulates as the pair prepares to land on the neighboring island. The horrific narrative she has constructed in her mind is recounted in vivid detail:

Temblaba de tan solo pensar que alguien, en pleno take-off, la señalara con el dedo y gritara: “Miren eso. Eso no es una mujer.” Y que viraran el avión para bajarla a empujones por la puerta de abordaje, tirándole las maletas al piso. Las maletas se abrirían de repente vomitando tacas, esparadrapos, fajas, cremas depiladoras, miles de afeites más, prestándose, las traidoras, como evidencia. (18)

She trembled just thinking that someone, in the middle of takeoff, might point a finger at her and shout, “Look at that. That is not a woman.” And they would turn the aircraft around and force her from it, throwing her suitcases to the ground. Her bags would open, suddenly spewing high heels, gauze and tape, depilatory creams, and thousands of other cosmetic items, lending themselves, the bitches, as evidence. (10)

“Look at that. That is not a woman,” narrates the horror of hailing, as it echoes Frantz Fanon’s classic scene in *Black Skins, White Masks* depicting the totalizing effects of interpellation (109). Unlike Fanon, who is identified, fixed, and thus defined (“Look, a Negro!”), Martha is identified only through a declaration of what she is not: “That is not a woman.” This recognition and hailing through negation signal a linguistic moment that marks the limits of intelligibility and thrusts Martha into the realm of the untranslatable, foreign entity, existing beyond legible categories of humanness.³

Martha’s traumatic fantasy blends her own fears and the recounted lived experience of her friend Maxine, another transgender woman who was caught and subsequently humiliated for trying to exercise the liberties afforded by travel. Here, the anxiety of the geopolitical border is mirrored in the anxiety of the politically gendered body as one attempts to walk past those authorized to guard the boundaries of nationally determined normative identities.⁴ In this scene and in this novel, travel is associated

with both risk and desire. The risk associated with leaving the local queer zone one has already learned to navigate is continually weighed against the desire to know what other worlds are available. The text also reminds readers that in a world obsessed with travel and migration, some people are denied mobility altogether.

Despite the impact of this opening scene, the novel is not preoccupied with the perceived gender angst of transgenders. Although she has survived a violent rape and lives precariously between two diametrically situated genders, Selena is “dressed in pity” (“*vestida de pena*”), but is not pitiful.⁵ Pity as the primary trope of the trans character is forcefully undone in this text; it is continually performed through the *boleros* that provide the musical accompaniment to the novel, but is never fully embodied. The reader instead senses that the articulations of emotional vulnerability Selena enacts are part of the performance of transgender femininity that she manipulates to enrapture her audience—both the imaginary audiences that witness the character’s vocal performances and the literary audiences that take in her narrative performance.

In this way Santos-Febres presents two different articulations of male-to-female transgender identity without privileging one over the other: Martha’s gender is fixed, defined, and rooted in an unchanging sense of individual identity and Selena’s is fluid and contextually driven. The author uses these differing relationships to gender positionality as a metaphor for understanding how the realities of gender, sexuality, and nation can be multiply interpreted. This insistence on variegated styles of interpretation extends beyond individual characters to encompass the analysis of queer localities. The novel is brimming with gossipy details about the queer club scene in Puerto Rico, and readers familiar with this terrain will recognize the names of discos, past and present, that have formed part of the island’s nightlife for decades. In contrast, the gay world of Santo Domingo seems to be hidden within the underground recesses of a class-based hierarchical sexual and social order: wealthy married men, vacationing tourists searching for “pretty chocolate skin,” and the young, poor men that service them both. The only “gay space” we witness in Santo Domingo is the Hotel Colón.⁶ A Canadian tourist who offers the first description of the hotel also provides his assessment of the local “scene.” Curiously, his first-person narration occurs in English in both the original Spanish version of the novel and its English translation. Like other key moments scattered throughout the text, this one is narrated to an unknown and unnamed narratee:

They come straight out of the countryside, young, inexperienced, whathaveyou. Most of them don’t even know that they are gay yet. They go to bed with you,

enjoy the whole thing, but as soon as it is over, they revert back to that Latin Lover Macho role they grew up with. It's kind of sexy watching them do that. So cute. Anyway, as soon as they figure out that they make more money spending a night with you than working at the hotel for a whole month, the roles change. They chase you like flies do honey. Most need the money a lot. And I'm happy to oblige. It must be tough to be gay in this country. (192)

In a Spanish-language text, the presence of an entire chapter (albeit a short one) in English is initially disconcerting. Santos-Febres clearly chooses to narrate the discourse of gay tourism and its attendant racialized exoticism in English, forcing readers to conceptualize their own relationship to language and power. For those reading the novel in Spanish, an understanding of written English already signals a position of privilege vis-à-vis the characters in the text; it thus implicates readers in the transnational circuits of exchange and power that the novel depicts. In the English translation, however, this shift is made invisible, remaining unmarked in the text, in a way eliding its potential significance for English-language readers who may have more in common with the gay Canadian than with Selena or the other Spanish-speaking characters.

This passage is significant for other reasons as well. It unabashedly narrates the economic intercourse between the first and third world (in English), to suggest how language, consumer culture, sexual tourism, and global capitalism transform local sexual realities.⁷ Once transformed, the significance of these interactions is reinscribed, in this case transposing the Euro-American significance of “gay” into this Caribbean space. This chronicle enacts the rhetoric that Martin F. Manalansan IV critiques in his essay “In the Shadows of Stonewall” where “gay gains meaning according to a developmental narrative that begins with an unliberated, ‘prepolitical’ homosexual practice and that culminates in a liberated, ‘out,’ politicized, ‘modern,’ ‘gay’ subjectivity” (487). He continues:

Gay in this instance, then, is meaningful within the context of the emergence of bourgeois civil society and the formation of the individual subject that really only occurs within capitalist and Western expansion. Categories of same-sex phenomena are placed within a Western-centered developmental teleology, with “gay” as its culminating stage. . . . [T]he “internationalizing” transnational gay and lesbian movement does not as yet contain a critique of its own universalizing categories; without an interrogation of its Eurocentric and bourgeois assumptions, this globalizing discourse risks duplicating an imperial gaze in relation to non-Western nonmetropolitan sexual practices and collectivities. (488)

Manalansan emphasizes the need to situate same-sex practices within multiply imagined and multiply determined spheres of influence. In this case,

that might include understanding that the sexual practices of the young men this tourist refers to may have more to do with economic longings or personal sexual satisfaction than with same-sex desire or a gay sexual identity.

Santos-Febres depicts the imperial gaze to which Manalansan refers; she also reminds readers that multiple spheres can include the complex relations between variously positioned centers and peripheries, complicating these binary distinctions. Martha and Selena, for example, are also gay tourists of a sort, as well as displaced Caribbean natives intent on interpreting this new neighboring island context within the framework of the familiar. At the Hotel Colón these worlds collide, and multiple narrators articulate their experiences within this particular queer context. Miss Martha Divine ends up as a guest of the hotel administrators with whom she has been negotiating unsuccessfully to sell Selena's performance, and where these upstanding members of Santo Domingo's elite reveal themselves as part of the island's gay underground. After she is unsuccessful in gaining entry into the "straight" Dominican hotel entertainment market, her reaction to the Hotel Colón serves as a lesson to the otherwise seasoned Miss Martha about transnational queer realities. "¿Cómo no se le había ocurrido antes? Ella bien sabe que todo país tiene su mafia, sus lugares escondidos, que aparentan ser una cosa, pero son otra. ¿Por qué pensó que esta isla sería diferente a la propia" (224)?; "How could it not have occurred to her sooner? Martha knows very well that every country has its underworld, its secret locations, which seem to be one thing but are something else entirely. Why did she think this island would be different from her own?" (180). Later she comments, "Sin embargo, en este país la cosa pinta diferente, como en Puerto Rico unas décadas atrás" (226); "But in this country, it's a completely different story, like Puerto Rico a couple of decades ago" (181). In these two statements, Martha's character articulates both a sense of sameness and difference between these two islands. While her later comment rings with an air of arrogance and cultural superiority in keeping with her character, we also sense her familiarity with this other mode of queerness. "Suerte que la Martha tenía su millaje. Su edad, su vida de casada con el marido hondureño le habían desarrollado ese sexto sentido necesario para leer códigos del mundo secreto" (226); "It's a good thing Martha had been around the block. Her age, her life as a married woman with her Honduran husband, had helped her develop the sixth sense she needed to read the codes of this secret world" (182). Martha's "sixth sense" is an acquired understanding of the complexities involved in translating queer codes across different cultural locations.

Not to be read as a tale of a cultural hierarchy or developmental progression vis-à-vis gay liberation, the text validates other overlapping modes

of queerness operating simultaneously in a Caribbean context. In some moments of the text, Puerto Rico seems to represent the more progressive of the two sites for queers, yet in other moments the novel complicates any such assertion. In fact, the relative sexual liberation and gay “openness” in Puerto Rico is narrated alongside the stinging realities of under-age street hustlers, police raids, violence, addiction, and poverty; these conditions can be linked to Puerto Rico’s colonial relationship to the United States.⁸ We also come to understand that even under the same national conditions, whether in the United States, Puerto Rico, or the Dominican Republic, differences in class, color, age, gender, and citizenship work to determine how sexual realities are experienced, interpreted, and articulated. Jasbir Kaur Puar notes: “Diasporic queers have not only various relationships to different states but indeed different relationships to common states” (“Transnational” 409).

In a novel that takes a basic understanding of Caribbean culture and politics as a given, a cursory discussion of the distinct relationships Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic occupy in relation to the United States and Latin America seems instructive. As a US colony, Puerto Rico is positioned as peripheral to a North American US center, yet as a US protectorate, it is simultaneously transformed into a desirable metropolis in a Caribbean and Latin American imaginary. Relative to the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico functions as the First World metropolis that seeks to deny entry to the Third World immigrant other; furthermore, by using the currency of US dollars, Puerto Rico demands to be welcomed as a tourist in that same Third World locality. Decades of US-inspired policies of economic underdevelopment and local political corruption have made life in the Dominican Republic more unbearable, so its neighbor Puerto Rico has begun to receive a steady wave of undocumented Dominican immigrants. A racial dimension is also at play that exemplifies unstable notions of centers and peripheries: the Dominican Republic—through its geographic proximity to Haiti—sees itself as “not black” in relation to Haiti, but is seen as “blacker” in relation to Puerto Rico. Duany, a social scientist who writes about the relationship between Puerto Ricans and Dominicans in Puerto Rico and in the diaspora, posits that, “Like Haitians in the Dominican Republic, Dominicans in Puerto Rico are becoming scapegoats for the underlying racial tensions” (164). This new wave of Dominican immigrants rattles the popularly held myth of Puerto Rico as a harmonious, multiracial nation. Now Afro-Puerto Ricans, because of their color, are becoming targets of anti-Dominican racialized xenophobia, and anti-Dominican xenophobia is reanimating underlying racial hostilities among native Puerto Ricans.

Afro-Puerto Rican Santos-Febres has written elsewhere in her fiction,

poetry, and essays about the racial politics of her homeland, yet in this novel issues of race are manifested in linguistic subtleties and ambiguity—poetic references to skin tone or phenotype—rather than in any direct identitarian claims to blackness. Likewise, this novel, while saturated with the production and circulation of discourses of Latinized femininity, offers very little in the way of significant female characters. Similarly, the United States, as the imagined site for Puerto Rican colonial domination, figures only peripherally in the plot, and when it is directly referenced, it is always depicted as another diasporic site in the far-reaching map of tropicalized localities. In her essay “Sirena canta boleros: travestismo y sujetos transcaribeños en *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*,” Jossianna Arroyo comments that this novel is as much about Dominican subjectivity as it is about Puerto Rican, a feature she claims most Puerto Rican critics fail to interrogate, enacting an erasure of the Dominican presence on the island on both the literary and literal levels (41).⁹ In contrast, Arroyo looks to construct a subject that she terms transcaribbean. But the Caribbean in this text extends well beyond the geographic edges of the archipelago; Miami, Santo Domingo, Los Angeles, Caracas, New York, and San Juan become coterminous points on the maps of multinational capitalist expansion and localized Latin American expression. The absence of a specifically and unambiguously marked Afro-Caribbean colonial female subject and of an English-speaking white US colonial oppressor creates the occasion for revealing other textures and subtleties. Rather than stabilizing and fixing racial, sexual, and colonial dynamics through explicative narratives, the text asks readers to continually read and reread their assumptions about these discursive constructions through the tinted lenses of narrative uncertainty. What emerge are the complexity and complicity of how projects of sexual and national subjectivity come to be formed. Yet, despite Santos-Febres’s seeming narrative dismantling of any singular trope of power relations, the text remains wholly preoccupied with the Caribbean’s obsession with race, gender, sexuality, class, and cosmopolitanism.

In an interview in *La Jornada*, Santos-Febres states that she specifically used transvestites as a metaphor to think through the complexities of Caribbean society. While assigning a wide-ranging category of human subjects—transvestites—the status of metaphor raises untenable political problems, within the novel transgender characters serve as much more than simply metaphors; they also function as complex social agents who interpret and respond to the challenges around them. The following quote however, also raises troubling interpretive concerns even as it suggests some intriguing possibilities for thinking through the performative functions of gender and nation. Santos-Febres states:

El concepto de travestismo me ayuda a pensar en cómo está organizada la sociedad en el Caribe y en América Latina: sus ciudades son travestis que se visten de Primer Mundo, adoptan los usos y las maneras de naciones que no les corresponden a fin de “escapar” de su realidad y acercarse a lo que cada día se ve más lejos: el progreso y la civilización. Muchos de los habitantes de nuestros países crean esos extraños exilios emocionales. (“Las Ciudades”)

The idea of transvestitism helped me to think about how society is organized in the Caribbean and Latin America: her cities are transvestites dressed as the First World, adopting the ways and manners of countries that don't correspond to them as a means of “escaping” their reality and approaching what every day seems farther away: progress and civilization. Many of the inhabitants of our countries create those strange emotional exiles.¹⁰

A literal, essentialist, and transphobic reading of this quote could suggest that like the cities Santos-Febres references, transvestites have adopted “ways and manners” of genders that do not correspond to them, or that they have created “strange emotional exiles” from their biologically (over) determined bodies.¹¹ A more productive interpretation might reveal something quite different, however. To think of Puerto Rico specifically as a First World transvestite aptly casts the island as a politically and economically ambiguous national body. Such a reading could suggest that in a Dominican context Martha Divine is “passing” as both female and First World. In keeping with Judith Butler's articulation of gender performativity, however, we know that Martha is not merely “passing” as female; instead she is an articulation of femaleness, an embodied undoing of the normative gender binary. Likewise, by performing its role as metropolis within the structure of this novel, Puerto Rico is not merely “passing” as First World; she has rather come to articulate the qualities of her position in the hierarchy of that geographic matrix. As transvestites expose the artificiality and underlying regulatory structures of the gender binary, Puerto Rico undoes the political distinction between center and periphery, dismantling the fiction that these divisions are more than attempts to produce the effects they instigate.

While Martha and Selena learn to negotiate queer life in the Dominican Republic, a parallel plot offers glimpses into the life of a young, effeminate Dominican boy named Leocadio. The kinship and sibling rivalry between these islands is sensed most powerfully through the narrative doubling of the Puerto Rican Selena with the Dominican character Leocadio, a new employee at the Hotel Colón. Both are poor boys lured into selling their youth and sexuality on the hard streets of these Caribbean capitals, and both are separated from their biological families and end up forming precarious familial relations within a queer metropolis. These stories

are so intertwined that at times their tales of tropical urban poverty begin to blur; only a geographic reference, linguistic regional colloquialism, or ethnic slur directed at the other hints at which character's point of view is presented. Several reviewers of the novel missed these cues, assuming that Leocadio was merely Selena's male alter ego. One reviewer even referred to both characters as Leocadio, completely erasing the character of Selena.¹² Some clues to the fact that they are separate characters may be difficult for readers unfamiliar with these two countries to decipher: geographic references to Puerto Rico include El Viejo San Juan, Caimito, and a reference to Parada 19, a bus stop designation used for marking rural villages in Puerto Rico. Likewise we are first introduced to Leocadio's wading in the calm crystalline waters of Bocachica, a famous beach on the outskirts of Santo Domingo. While making sense of these geographic references may require a form of insider cultural knowledge, other textual clues seem quite direct, even in the English translation. In a scene narrated by Leocadio's mother, we learn that her husband has left the island on a raft. She states: "Dizque me iba a mandar el dinero para los pasajes y todavía lo estoy esperando. Yo creo que por allá se casó con una boriqúa, que dicen que son más putas que las gallinas" (75). "He said he would send me money for tickets for me and the kids and I'm still waiting. I think he married *una boriqúa*, a Puerto Rican woman, over there—they say they are sluttier than chickens" (56). This ethnic attack on Puerto Rican women would seem hard to justify if the speaker were not using it to differentiate between herself, a native Dominican woman who cannot migrate, and this "other" *boriqúa* woman, "over there." Perhaps these critical erasures are merely a failure of imagination or a lack of knowledge about the region, but nevertheless they reveal an underlying investment and insistence on enforcing a singular and knowable gender identity.

In a novel where travel forms such a central motif, the reference to a raft in that passage serves as a startling counterpoint to the opening scene in the airplane that depicts Selena and Martha's means of inter-island transportation. The differences in local specificities are also marked linguistically in the Spanish, where particularities of Dominican and Puerto Rican oral inflections are made textual. Even this hierarchy of nations is continually undone, however, and Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic routinely exchange quips and jabs in the novel. We are reminded that despite its poverty and faulty electricity, the Dominican Republic is a republic, something its more bourgeois *boriqúa* sister cannot yet claim. Santos-Febres uses narrative to blur Caribbean borders in the imaginary of northern tourists, where the commonalities of sexualized bodies, white beaches, and dark rum render differences in language, culture, history, and geography inconsequential. While in this novel and elsewhere, Puerto

Ricans and Dominicans seem intent on accentuating their differences in terms of political status, economic currency, and cultural particularities, to many European and North American tourists (and perhaps readers and critics) these sister islands appear indistinguishable.

The narrative blurring of these two characters is further accentuated by the fact that most sections of the novel that detail the life of Leocadio are completely divorced from the main events of the narrative, which focus on Martha and Selena. Yet, a possible meeting between the two is hinted at in the text, as both walk along the water's edge on the beach in Santo Domingo's Bocachica:

Leocadio caminó hacia aquella aparición y la miró con una curiosidad que no podía disimular. Era un muchacho, un muchacho que parecía una nena, igual que él, igual que su hermana, pero con la piel color canela claro, el pelo muy oscuro y las cejas depiladas. El muchacho le devolvió la mirada con un hastío hostil. Pero después el chico le regaló una sonrisa. Leocadio también sonrió. (57)

Leocadio walked towards that apparition and looked at him with unmasked curiosity. It was a boy, a boy that looked like a girl. Just like him, just like his sister, but with light cinnamon-colored skin, extremely dark hair, and carefully plucked eyebrows. The boy returned the stare with open hostility. But then he smiled at Leocadio. And Leocadio smiled back. (41)

Positioned facing the sea they share, this sense of curiosity, hostility, and sameness serves as a metaphor for both gender solidarity and solidarity between these two island cultures. Here again the English translation fails to capture the rich range of interpretive possibilities and linguistic gender play of the original Spanish. The feminine object that informs the *la* of "la miró" could be either "la aparición," as the translator seems to have decided, or Selena herself, as the feminine referent. Yet, as both of these characters stand on the edges of sexual and national categories of difference, a look that initially registers hostility softens into a smile of mutual recognition.

While Santos-Febres may seem to highlight the differences between Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, simultaneously she uses her writing to invoke a sense of circularity and continuity across borders. In her doctoral dissertation, she employs the term "translocality" to refer to the continuous displacement and continuity within Puerto Rican literature both on the island and in the United States:

[T]ranslocality is a tool that defines the social and discursive practices of writers that reflect upon conditions of circular migration. It differs from hybridity

or oppositional consciousness in that it focuses on the problems of location and displacement within multinational contexts. Translocality directly applies to texts that respond to multiple discursive fields of racial, class, national, gender and sexual identities. It sets them in motion and pays attention to textual practices that uncover and thus criticize conditions of multiple oppressions. (“Translocal” 176)

“Translocality” suggests how local conditions are variously impacted by the global, yet simultaneously are engaged in a process of redefining interpretations of both global and local formations. Throughout the novel, Santos-Febres emphasizes both the specificities of local conditions and the interrelationships across borders. Rather than focusing on the relationship between North and South, the United States and Puerto Rico, the novel highlights the interpenetration of gay worlds across the Caribbean basin. Anecdotes told from various points of view recount the constant circulation of language, bodies, music, culture, and money across national and cultural borders. For example, the drag bars of Puerto Rico seem replete with Cuban, Nuyorican, and Latin American performers. Leocadio’s father, lured by the demand for cheap Dominican labor, left on a *yola* to Puerto Rico, never to return. In San Juan, the street corner where Selena and others sell their trade is shared by the Dominican owners of the *comeivete*, bringing together these two marginal segments of Puerto Rican society. Martha Divine, born in Honduras, has her plastic surgery done in Caracas after meeting a sweet Venezuelan doctor in a disco in San Juan, and peppers her Spanish with a hodgepodge of “*muy wow*” English phrases. The seepage from one locality to another exists on every level.

In both the Spanish original and the English translation, language itself becomes a powerful vehicle through which cultural circulation is enacted, marking the movement of bodies and tongues across locations. In addition to heavy doses of English in the original or Spanish in the translation, the narrative is liberally seasoned with the cosmopolitan accents of Italian and French.¹³ Stephen Lytle’s English translation of the text contains unusually heavy doses of Spanish, demanding a basic knowledge of Spanish that evidences how Spanish has come to function as the foreign national language of the United States, much the way English functions for Puerto Rican readers. In Lytle’s text, words such as *maricón*, *hombre*, *locas*, *mi amor*, *abuela*, *puta*, *mijito*, *mamita*, *querida*, and *vieja* infuse the English translation, making literal the transnational multiplicities of the text. The result is that the English translation of the novel registers the same heteroglossic effect as many US Latino novels written in English.

Santos-Febres’s narrative articulation of translocality is further exemplified in her repeated references to queer pop culture as a way to signal a cultural iconography that travels. Musical accompaniment of disco classics

such as Blondie's *Heart of Glass* and references to Cher and Diana Ross contrast with Selena's equally campy cascade of *boleros* such as "Teatro," "Miseria," and "Tentación." Martha refers to her Dominican conquest as her own Marcello Mastroianni, while insisting that Stan, the Swedish owner of Hotel Colón, is the spitting image of Marlene Dietrich. These pop culture references seem to confirm the presence of a queer global performative vocabulary while suggesting that these many spaces also form part of a larger network of cultural, economic, and political exchange. The queer codes of the drag diva, the kitsch of camp, and the other staged excesses associated with a certain sector of urban gay male culture evidence how marginalized subjects reassemble and dispatch the tropes of popular culture across locations. In *Tropics of Desire: Queer Interventions from Latino America*, José Quiroga warns us, however, that local queer subcultures' adoption of global queer modalities needs to be read as both an act of political defiance and as a product of global capitalist structures of exchange. He asserts:

The national bodies are reconfigured into transnational bodies, which collaborate more effectively with capitalist ventures. The specificities are also important to take into account. They are not merely cultural inflections, but arise from a critique that homosexuals express in their own localities. Male homosexuals, for example, reconfigure their lack of validation in their localized sites and remotivate this into a transnational identification. (11)

Quiroga's analysis delineates how performative consumer impulses work in a transnational marketplace and how queer individuals are hailed as consumers of both tangible products and political identifications. Yet Quiroga and Santos-Febres both remind us that each queer locality produces its own regionally inflected acts of cultural appropriation—some that travel and some that do not. In fact, most of the pop culture icons revered in gay nightclubs throughout Latin America and the *boleros* of Selena's serenades would be totally unrecognizable to most non-Spanish-speaking queer audiences. Santos-Febres's text requires that readers remain attuned to both local specificities and the context of these intercultural engagements. This is not a case of the simple importation of Euro-American gay culture juxtaposed onto Caribbean society. Instead this is Judy Garland meets La Lupe.¹⁴

In a Latin American context, these modalities of queerness signal membership in a larger queer marketplace of ideas, where queer Latinos are both the consumers and the producers of queer countercultures. Like all forms of membership, access to money, material goods, and the linguistic ability to decipher the codes limit who participates in these circuits of production and consumption. Leocadio and Selena are both on

the margins of the queer global culture interpellated in the novel. The *bolero* classics Selena brings to the queer stage were not gleaned through the films of Pedro Almodóvar or the drag shows at New York's Escuelita, but through the memory of her grandmother's voice. In the novel, *boleros* perform the angst of longing and displacement, drawing attention to how the drama that is desire circulates through a Latinized romantic imaginary. Quiroga writes of the *bolero*, "It works on the registers of defiance, nostalgia, anger and lust; its geographical referents are a mental constellation of tropics that can be invented at will. These emblematic spaces can exist only by erasing other tropics, those where poverty is the norm and not the exception, where the panache and romance of the nightclub are available only to a few" (152). In *Sirena Selena*, the *bolero*, the ultimate referent of transnational desire, performs the confrontation of panache and poverty through romance. Unlike much of Latin American music where national origin often is marked conspicuously by rhythm, precise references, or linguistic intonations, *boleros* are intended to be illusive, meant to signal universal angst, love, and drama, regardless of the nationality or gender of the performer. In *boleros*, it is not origin that is valued but interpretation; it is the variant that recalls and replaces the other originals that preceded it that comes to be praised. Selena uses the hallucinatory power of the *bolero* to transport and transcend space, time, and situated bodies and to seduce and disarm those that would confine her. It is the *bolero* that allows Selena to travel both metaphorically and materially.

On the other hand, Leocadio's character represents the prohibition of travel and mobility. An employee of Hotel Colón, he is strictly barred from entering the Hotel's disco, confined to the space of dishwasher and room cleaner. The world of the disco is reserved for tourists and waiters who service them, such as his friend Migueles. In one scene Migueles prepares to give Leocadio a bracelet presented to him by an Italian tourist; the bracelet is identical to the one given to him earlier by a German tourist. In contrast to the gay Canadian tourist who first offered his reading of the sexual scene at the Hotel Colón, here Migueles "speaks back" to offer his account of the sexual and economic exchanges between Dominican men and gay foreign tourists:

Los europeos son mejores que los gringos. Saben respetar a los hombres y no se ponen con eso de querer besar a uno, ni cogerle la mano en público. Hacen lo suyo si acaso y ya. Pero al fin y a la postre, todos ellos se parecen. Les encantan los dominicanos. Vienen para acá solo a eso. Hasta regalan las mismas boberías. (201)

The Europeans are better than the gringos. They know how to respect *hombres* and they don't try stuff, like kissing you on the mouth or holding your hand in

public. They do their thing and that's it. But in the end, they are all the same. They love *dominicanos* and that's why they come here. They even give the same silly gifts. (159)

The scene ends with him suggesting that he and Leocadio can go out to walk the *malecón* together in their matching bracelets, yet stating emphatically, “Además ¿para qué quiero yo dos pulseras? Ni que fuera maricón” (201); “Besides, what do I want two bracelets for? I'm no *maricón*” (159). Rather than reading this scene as simply a case of Migueles denying his “true” gay identity as the Canadian tourist would have us believe, it seems more productive to try to understand how Migueles separates what he does for money (or jewelry) from how he perceives himself. In his mind there is nothing he shares with these European and American tourists—not their money, not their access to travel, and not their gay identity.

Leocadio's relationship to the gay world symbolized by the Hotel Colón appears more complicated. Sensing that what lies behind the disco doors has something to do with who he wishes to be, he desperately wants access to this forbidden world. With the Hotel Colón as a backdrop, Leocadio and Migueles begin to explore their relationship to one another and in the process begin to come to terms with their own articulations of gender. Later, as the two slow dance, Leocadio tries to reconcile his knowledge of sexuality with his understanding of same-sex desire. He relies not on a discourse of gay liberation, but on something else altogether. He notes:

El más grande, la más chiquita. Uno hombre, el otro mujer, aunque puede ser el más chico, que no necesariamente sea un hombre el más fuerte ni el más grande que el otro, sino el que dirige, el que decide, el que manda. Hay muchas maneras de mandar, muchas formas de ser hombre o ser mujer, una decide. A veces se puede ser ambas sin dejar de ser lo uno ni lo otro. (258)

The bigger one, the smaller one. One is *hombre*, the other *mujer*, although he can be the smaller one; the man is not necessarily stronger or bigger than the other one, but he is the one who leads, who decides, who rules. There are many ways to rule, many things required to be *un hombre* or to be *una mujer*, for each person can decide for himself. Sometimes you can even be both. Without having to choose one or the other. (209)

Dancing together in the forbidden foreign zone that was created for other queer bodies presents a local expression of same-sex tenderness and queer yearnings that exists just outside the sightlines of transnational culture.

Just as Leocadio articulates the many ways to be a man and the many ways to negotiate and exercise power, the novel suggests there are varied articulations of sexual identity, including different ways to inhabit and nar-

rate transgender subjectivities and different ways to perform and validate same-sex desire. In her novel, Santos-Febres plays with a wide range of possibilities the Spanish language affords for depicting the nuances of gendered and racialized national realities rather than only relying on unambiguous fixed linguistic markers of race, gender, and sexuality. The result is a more complicated and multidimensional depiction of how localized power functions in diverse spaces. Rather than offering preformulated political postures, the author creates textual opportunities for readers to grapple with their own normative interpretations of race, gender, sexuality, and nation. Just as her characters destabilize gender and national distinctions, they also provide a way out of the binary that situates queer Caribbean sexualities as either a subaltern native homosexual reality that is liberated through its relationship to the cosmopolitan center or an instance of imperialist imposition of foreign sexual and political agendas.

This text is about Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic, but it is also about the ways different geopolitical locations become lodged in the Caribbean imagination, an imaginative map that reaches far beyond the edges of the Caribbean Sea to touch against ideas of European cosmopolitanism, African blackness, and US consumer culture. By creating a more complex and interpenetrating map of the queer circuits of transnational exchange that define the Caribbean basin, the text points to the ways centers and margins are performatively constituted as it reveals the regulatory systems of capital that inform these exchanges. Through narration and linguistic word play, Santos-Febres exposes the limits and possibilities of both literal and metaphoric translations of language and culture as she moves her readers across these sites of local and national difference. In the process, the novel asks that we consider how narrative subjects and reading publics are interpellated through their relationship to sexuality, language, and the nation; their access to both mobility and stasis; and their role as producers, consumers, and servants of transnational culture. Finally, her text allows us to witness how subjects resist and redefine these totalizing taxonomies to dance and sing the speckled modalities of sexual and national longings.

Notes

1. For the character of Selena, I use the gender pronoun that best corresponds to the gender presentation being referred to in the text. “He” refers to those stages of his life such as his childhood when he was male, and “she” references those textual moments when she is written as a feminized character. This nonunified gender coding also follows the conventions of both the Spanish and English texts, although the fluidity of gender vis-à-vis this character is represented differently in each language.
2. All translations are from the English translation by Stephen Lytle.
3. For an eloquent discussion of the relationship between transgender subjectivity and legibility as human, see various essays in Judith Butler’s *Undoing Gender*, specifically “Besides Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy” (17-39) and “Doing Justice to Someone” (57-74).
4. Since 9/11, air travel for transgenders has indeed become more complicated as they have come under increased suspicion and surveillance in airport security. In September 2003, the Department of Homeland Security issued press release #238 that specifically targeted transpopulations. It states, “Terrorists will employ novel methods to artfully conceal suicide devices. Male bombers may dress as females in order to discourage scrutiny.” See “DHS Advisory.”
5. In the original Spanish publication, *vestida de pena* functions as the rhythmic rejoinder in the novel’s title. In English, the title appears as *Sirena Selena: A Novel*, and what is added is a clarification of genre.
6. I leave it to the reader to ponder the word play associated with Colón as both an anatomical designation and the Spanish name for that most famous American colonizer, Columbus.
7. For a discussion of queer tourism, see the 2002 issue of *GLQ* titled *Queer Tourism: Geographies of Globalization*, specifically the essays by Jasbir Puar, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, and Dereka Rushbrook.
8. Same-sex sexual relations are not illegal in the Dominican Republic, while only recently decriminalized in Puerto Rico in June 2003. For an analysis of the public debates surrounding that decision in Puerto Rico, see my essay “Getting F****d in Puerto Rico: Metaphoric Provocations and Queer Activist Interventions.”
9. Jossianna Arroyo’s essay is part of a special issue on the novel published by *Centro Journal*, the journal of the Center for Puerto Rican Studies. The fact that an entire issue was dedicated to this novel suggests its value and relevance in the field of Puerto Rican studies.
10. This passage is my own translation.
11. Given what could be construed as a transphobic reading of this passage, it seems particularly necessary to mention the warmth and excitement with which this book was received by the queer and transgender communities of Puerto Rico. For a discussion of its reception and its significance within the context of Puerto Rican literature see Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez.
12. See specifically the review by Barbara Mujica in *Review in Americas (English Edition)*. See also the review in *Publishers Weekly*.

13. It is curious to note how a novel about transnational circulation circulates transnationally as a cultural artifact through translation. *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*'s publication in Spanish was immediately followed by translations in English and Italian; the novel has since been translated into French and German.
14. La Lupe was a Cuban-born diva of the 1950s and 1960s most often associated with the Nuyorican Latin jazz and boogaloo era in Harlem. The 1990s revival of interest in this era is often credited to the Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar. See José Quiroga for his eloquent reading of La Lupe as a transnational queer pop icon (162-68).

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