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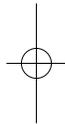
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MAYRA SANTOS FERRÉS

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SELENA
VESTIDA
DE PEÑA

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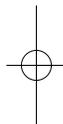


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Sirena Selena vestida de pena: A Novel for the New Millenium and for New Critical Practices in Puerto Rican Literary and Cultural Studies

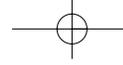
ALBERTO SANDOVAL-SÁNCHEZ



ABSTRACT

Mayra Santos-Febres' first novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000) received immediate success and critical acclaim. This essay, which serves as an introduction to a dossier centering on the novel, situates the text in the Puerto Rican literary landscape and discursive formations. The main purpose of this essay is to summarize, contextualize, and examine the critical readings of the novel by the contributors in the dossier who for the most part engage on queer scholarship and Cultural Studies. It analyzes the multiplicity of critical practices, methodologies, and theoretical approaches that they employ which, at the same time, bear witness to a process of canonization.

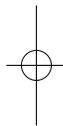
[Key words: Puerto Rican literature, critical practice, queer scholarship, heteronormality, Third World Literature, interrogative ending]



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ublished in 2000 and immediately translated into English and Italian, Mayra Santos-Febres's first novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, which center stages *mariconería* and *travestismo*, took the global publishing market, literary circles, and academia by storm. Santos is no newcomer in Puerto Rican literature, but she is still very young—born in 1966. In the Puerto Rican literary landscape, she has paved her way diligently since the 1990s with two books of poetry (*El orden escapado* and *Anam y manigua*) and two collections of short stories (*Pez de vidrio* and *El cuerpo correcto*). Her success as the most acclaimed Puerto Rican writer in the beginning of the new millennium was foretold when she received the 1994 short story Letras de Oro Prize from the University of Miami/Spain'92, and confirmed when she won the coveted Juan Rulfo Prize in 1997 (awarded by Radio Sarandi in Paris). In 1997 her short stories were also translated into English and collected under the title *Urban Oracles*. Other recent publications include a book of poetry, *Tercer Mundo* (2000); a translation into Spanish (in collaboration with Rafael Franco) of Nuyorican writer Willie Perdomo's book of poetry *Postcards of El Barrio* (2002); and a second novel, entitled *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* (2002). Even more admirable, Santos finds the time to do her creative writing in addition to teaching at the University of Puerto Rico, publishing scholarly essays, contributing articles to newspapers, and partaking in television and other cultural endeavors.¹ Needless to say, she has been busy touring the U.S., Latin America, the Caribbean, and Europe to promote her work in whatever spare time is left. Undoubtedly, at this moment, Santos is the most prolific, visible, and transnational new novelist in Puerto Rico. *Sirena Selena* attests to the originality and creativity of a consummate poet, an innovative short story writer, a provocative essayist, and a dynamic cultural activist.

It is suitable to remark that Santos's present dossier constitutes both the instant canonization of the novel and a powerful moment in queer scholarship in Puerto Rican literary criticism and Cultural Studies. The novel's recognition and critical attention is comparable to Luis Rafael Sánchez's *La guaracha del Macho Camacho* (1976), Magali García Ramis's *Felices días, tío Sergio* (1986), and Rosario Ferré's *Maldito amor* (1986); as well as to Ferré's short story collection *Papeles de Pandora* (1976) and Ana Lydia Vega's *Encancarablado y otros cuentos de naufragio* (1983). Although other gay novels appeared in the 1990s—Daniel Torres's *Morir sí se da una primavera* (1993), Osvaldo Luis Cintrón's *De buena tinta* (1997), Angel Lozada's *La patografía* (1998), and Eliseo Colón's *Archivo Catalina* (2000), none were embraced as *Sirena Selena*. Not even the works of the most out and insurgent Puerto Rican gay writer Manuel Ramos Otero,

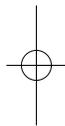




who died of AIDS—author of *El cuento de la mujer del mar* (1979) and *Página en blanco y staccato* (1987) and of two exquisite books of poetry *El libro de la muerte* (1985) and *Invitación al polvo* (1991)—precipitated such an enthusiastic academic reception, not even among a gay readership.

As for *Sirena Selena*, its publication (18 May 2000) became a festive cultural performance in Old San Juan in calle de San Sebastián, as if the protagonists of the novel, drag queens Martha Divine and Sirena Selena, demanded the enactment of a queer happening beyond the closet and academia. The event included Santos's charming participation, bolero renditions by Ivette Román and Choco Orta in tribute to Sirena Selena, who is the absolute incarnation of the female bolerista tradition in the novel, and a splendid introduction by Luis Felipe Díaz, professor in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Puerto Rico and well-known professional female impersonator, whose feminine persona is known as the one and only Lizza Fernanda.

This dossier gives testimony to the immediate popularity of the novel as well as to the dense semiotic and discursive interplay that transvestism and queer desire unleash in the narrative and in the process of its reception. It is Santos's employment of transvestism and its transmutability and applicability to different circumstances that invite a variety of alternative critical readings and diverse interpretations. Of course, each reading is anchored in a particular point of view and political positioning; hence, each critic locates transvestism in a given context (gender, sexual, social, racial, colonial, transcultural, allegorical, or metaphorical). The essays collected here document multiple theoretical approaches and methodologies that inform the latest research and scholarship in the field. These critical readings and practices at times intersect, overlap, complement, or even contradict each other. No one has a final reading. Rather, this dossier constitutes a bundle of critical essays that celebrate a queer novel, an unprecedented literary canonization, and a novelist who crossed over, into territory where no other Puerto Rican writer has dared to go before.

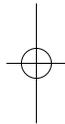


Luis Felipe Díaz's essay "La narrativa de Mayra Santos y el travestismo cultural," the first—in this collection, offers a theoretical and contextual introduction to approach Santos's works. Not only does he propose a theoretical approach to understand transvestism and how it applies to the novel, he also situates accurately the novel in the socio-literary context that preceded it. In this sense, he demonstrates how *Sirena Selena* engages in a dialogue with previous canonical literary works and how it questions, destabilizes, and undermines the authority of dominant phallogocentric cultural discursive foundations and regulatory practices from the vintage point and through the modus operandi of transvestism. Thus, Santos's works make readers contemplate the mechanisms of self-fashioning in Puerto Rican culture and enforced ways of seeing.

In his quest to undo phallogocentrism and heteronormality, Díaz revisits Genesis to render visible the patriarchal maneuvers that have governed Western Judeo-Christian civilization in the out-casting of the Other. Departing from and joining the feminist proposals of Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, and Rosi Braidotti, Díaz uncovers the institutionalization of phallogocentrism in that inaugural moment in Paradise when the serpent and her ally (a woman) were expelled and relegated to the margin. For him, this is a primary moment of transvestism, since the serpent, indeed,



was a drag queen. After being dethroned, silenced, and exiled, Satan, now “in drag” as a serpent, reentered Paradise to contest and oppose the word of the Father and his hegemony. Both the serpent and Eve incarnate a perverse transgression against the authority of the Father and a search for an alternate pleasure. This expulsion inscribes the anxiety and fear that Otherness poses to civilization, particularly in the sexual domain. Adam and Eve’s eviction condemned them to the suppression of desire; additionally, they were to be dressed in vestments that signaled their fall from a supposed Origin (when androgyny was the rule and proximity to the body of the mother was not forbidden). Consequently, this primal scene conveys how patriarchy functions within the operatives of sameness and hierarchies of binary oppositions (male/female, mind/body, culture/nature) in its legitimization of power, and in the implementation of heterosexuality, the institution of the family, and gender hierarchies, which are always fueled by homophobia. And, I would add, misogyny. For Díaz, this patriarchal scheme constitutes the installation of gendered differentiation and the concurrent regime of cultural and sexual categories. But, as Judith Butler has theorized, gender is a performative act and a cultural construction in given social and power relations, a copy of a copy, a repetition, that has no origin or authenticity; Butler states: “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being... consolidat[ing] and naturaliz[ing] the convergent power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression” (33). From this perspective, in our effort to naturalize gender, we all become drag queens or transvestites in our gender rehearsals and performances. Furthermore, as Díaz indicates, in our postmodern world, dominated by simulacra and consumerism, we have done away with essentialist, monolithic, and unitary identities, as well as with utopian and nostalgic narratives, privileging instead subjectivities in a process that liberates the body, repressed desire, and the unconscious. It is precisely within this economy of desire, constant negotiations, and identities in the making that *Sirena Selena* participates, and from which Santos launches her literary project.



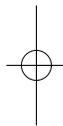
For Díaz, Santos’s literary corpus represents a continuation of the literary transgressive project initiated in the 1970s by writers such as Rosario Ferré, Ana Lydia Vega, Magali García Ramis, Edgardo Rodríguez Juliá, and, of course, the heretic homosexual Manuel Ramos Otero, who revolted against the Law of the Father and its official canon. Díaz illustrates first how these writers rebuked the authoritarian and heterosexist insular (world)view and narcissist “na(rra)cionales” allegories of hegemonic intellectuals such as René Marqués, José Luis González, and Pedro Juan Soto; and second, how their intervention in the literary domain constituted an effort to articulate new identity and discursive formations that were not solely defined in response to American imperialism and grounded in master narratives of nationalist and cultural resistance. In this respect, as Ruben Ríos has brilliantly observed: “In Puerto Rico literature has been usually at the service of national identity, a claim made more urgent by what has been perceived as the unresolved political status of two successive stages of colonialism. Desire has therefore meant above all national desire. Writing evolves around this founding void, and the need to fill it up, usually through the resurrection or rehabilitation of an empowering unifying myth: the defense of the national language, the inseminating power of an originating race or the possible recollection of a broken memory” (“Caribbean Dislocations,” 102).



Since the 1970s, Díaz elaborates, most Puerto Rican writers have questioned, debunked, and re-visioned a patriarchal past that could only conceive the nation in chauvinist, racist, homophobic, and essentialist terms. In doing so, they gave voice to marginal characters and the Other's ways of seeing, thus articulating a contestatory and transgressive writing act. As Juan Gelpí has stated in his book *Literatura y paternalismo en Puerto Rico* (1993), this counter-discourse to the paternalist male-centered canon led to the creation of a counter-canon, and new ways of representation/ "modos de representación"² (174). Certainly, since the 1970s, literary works depict the collapse of the hegemonic image of "la gran familia puertorriqueña," and bear witness to a colonial status that gave way to a social and economic crisis, signaling the failure of the Estado Libre Asociado.

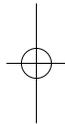
Yet Díaz goes a step further in his approach to Santos's work. He differentiates her from the previous writers, given that her transgression and her subversion of the Law of the Father and its symbolic imaginary are not solely limited to a recognition of Otherness and the characters' installation in the margin. For Díaz, Santos dares to go beyond the ideological limitations of the previous generation, whose ways of seeing have remained anchored in the dynamics of imperial and colonial relations without fully escaping the gaze of the Father, without allowing themselves to be fully seduced by the Other, and without causing gender trouble. Indeed, what Díaz acknowledges, much like what happens in Ramos Otero's writing, is Santos's retreat from the center (and the lettered city) into liminal and marginal spaces that cause in its inhabitants a continual deterritorialization (be it spatial, psychological, or literary) and total immersion in abjection. This, in turn, fully generates in Santos's literary works an exploration that trespasses and goes beyond the limits of the body, desire, the repressed, and official culture. She does not speak for the Other, but from the experience of Otherness. She does not look at the Other, but directs her gaze within, liberating the body and unconscious desire. Her characters are wanderers, nomads, dissidents, trespassers, homeless people, and deterritorialized marginal beings who inhabit desiring bodies, continually diving into the unconscious, and searching for whatever is prohibited in the body politic and not tolerated by the paternal law.³ Díaz's theoretical point of view gains relevance when Santos's statements about Ramos Otero are taken into consideration: "Creo que Manuel Ramos Otero, un narrador muerto en 1991 de SIDA, es el mejor escritor puertorriqueño que ha dado el país. Es excelente, una de mis influencias más presentes y frecuentes" ("Literatura para curar el asma", 5); and "Ramos Otero está en mi novela... es como mi 'papi' literario" ("La autora del mes," 19). These comments not only place Santos in the margin, outside the patriarchal canon, and in the territory of Ramos Otero's s/exile, homosexual topography, and migrancy (in New York City); they also establish her alliance with homosexuals by publicly recognizing Ramos Otero as her primary literary model and source of inspiration. Even if that identification is the result of her oppositional experience as a black female, and the consequence of her solidarity with gays and people with AIDS, as Díaz points out, her writing exposes a lost or forgotten grammar in an oppressive heterosexist society. In this way, transvestism functions as an insubordinate act of disobedience and rebellion and/or ultimate liberation, that perversely and ironically defies and deconstructs Puerto Rican national culture, privileging the experiential corporeality and celebrating the eccentric and hybrid postcolonial identities of the Other.

Surprisingly, in the last part of the essay, Díaz's professorial posture takes a radical discursive shift to give voice to Lizza Fernanda, who ludically revisits the Puerto Rican





literary canon, addressing writers from Eugenio María de Hostos to contemporary ones, in order to *queer* them, to *homoeroticize* their works, and to *cast as drag* and *camp* traditional literary discourse. In an imaginary journey s/he takes both Puerto Rican straight (homophobic) writers and protagonists of canonical heterosexual works to gay and lesbian bars and discos. S/he surrounds them with “real” drag queens, breaking the silence and dismantling taboos, and significantly brings out of the closet the history, bodily pleasures, and lifestyles of gay life. Accordingly, Díaz/Lizza Fernanda is acting in complicity with Ramos Otero and Santos in their efforts to break away from compulsory heterosexuality, to unleash and validate homosexual and female desire, to undo binary oppositions and hierarchical relations of power, to unmask illusory and fictive categories of the body, gender, and sexuality, and to put into practice a liberated *écriture* inscribed in a ceaseless notion of *juissance*, body performativity, and subversive displacement and multiplicity of identities. In this context, Gelpí’s affirmation from 1993 acquires full meaning: “Romper con el canon equivale a salir de la casa, a emigrar de manera literal o figurada, y, de cierto modo, a unirse a la diáspora. Dicho de otro modo: romper con ese canon equivale a hacer una especie de viaje de la cultura letrada a la ‘popular’” (188–89). *Sirena Selena* is the ultimate realization and deconstruction of the order of things in the Puerto Rican postmodern literary imaginary, and the compulsive embodiment of a polymorphously perverse seduction and eroticism incarnated in the protagonist, implied in the homoerotic act of transvestism and made explicit with the act of sodomy, and liberated in the double-voiced critical practice of Luis Felipe Díaz and the transvestite discursive act of Lizza Fernanda.



Jossianna Arroyo, who teaches Latin American literature at the University of Michigan and who is the author of *Travestismos culturales: literatura y etnografía en Cuba y Brasil*, also accomplishes an alternative critical reading of *Sirena Selena*, this time concentrating on the Dominican presence in the text. Well-equipped with a savvy and eye-opening theoretical approach, which is based on her concept of “cultural drag,” Arroyo renders visible and recovers what critics have constantly omitted, made invisible, and silenced: most of the action in the novel takes place in the Dominican Republic and half of the characters are Dominicans. By doing so, she unveils the rooted prejudices and racist practices against Dominicans in Puerto Rico. Instead of simply limiting her interpretation of the historical and economic experiences of the Hispanic Caribbean inscribed in the novel to a sort of allegorical transvestism, her innovative theoretical reading demonstrates how, through the construction of marginal queer subjectivities and the utilization of drag, Santos captures the transnational and transglobal dynamics of the Caribbean. She concentrates on how, in the novel, the migratory route between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico is reversed in order to call attention to the articulation and configuration of a transcaribbean subjectivity in process. This reversal, in turn, reveals the transactions and economies in which both Puerto Ricans and Dominicans mirror each other in their colonial and diasporic practices. Hence, the novel is constructed through the mechanisms of the doppelgänger and stark dualities (i.e., Junior/Sirena Selena, Sirena Selena/Leocadio, Sirena Selena/Solange, abuela/Doña Adelina, country/city, Puerto Rico/Dominican Republic, biological family/choice family) in order to uncover how these new subjectivities, always in the making, operate outside traditional and national identity formations in both countries. In these terms, the Other—no matter whether it be homosexuals, drag queens, the poor, Afro-Caribbean peoples, prostitutes, women, or Dominicans—in the process of migration and

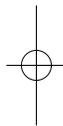


continual displacements challenges, transgresses, and subverts national limits. Above all, the Dominican Other represents for Puerto Ricans a “dangerous border” that approximates and locates them face-to-face with the ethnic, social, and cultural Afro-Antillean and Caribbean dimensions of their own identity. Arroyo strategically asserts that Santos does not tackle the Dominican presence in Puerto Rico as a difference, but rather as a given racial and racialized body and identity that constitutes a dangerous similarity to Puerto Ricans themselves. But Santos goes further. As Arroyo brings to light, the novelist equates racist practices and institutionalized racism to homophobia and AIDS phobia as she relocates such prejudices against the figures of the transvestite and the prostitute (who is believed to embody and transmit AIDS).

Arroyo’s analysis of the novel convincingly succeeds because her concept of “cultural drag” draws attention to the importance of the body and its performativity. It is Sirena Selena’s body, as mulata and transvestite, through which the performativity of gender, race, and sexuality is negotiated in the novel. Such “cultural drag” not only exposes the limits of the body as a signifying practice and the locus of cultural inscriptions, it also is the intermediate location where constant negotiations and displacements take place and allow the subject to gain agency. By taking as its paradigm the body of the transvestite (Sirena Selena), who through her/his voice (by singing boleros) and gender performance deconstructs the national (and heterosexual) borders and categories, Santos proposes the possibility of creating and resignifying identities and locations for those in the margin, as well as establishing their access to social agency. On the other hand, Leocadio, the young Dominican drag queen in the making and Sirena Serena’s double, incarnates a given “consciousness” that points to the historical processes of the Caribbean, from rural migration to touristic (sexual) exploitation, to privileges of citizenship and race, to migratory circuits between the United States, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic.

In this Caribbean migratory circuit, Dominicans wish to migrate to Puerto Rico and Puerto Ricans to the U.S. In her novel Santos derails Puerto Rican migration to the Dominican Republic in order to register given relations of power through the figure of the transvestite, and in order to display the simulacrum of identity performance and “cultural drag” that characterize Caribbean nations as a result of their colonial subjection and transcultural condition. From this perspective, the transvestite’s (gendered and sexual) body and voice, the bolero, the make-up, and the illusion of passing as woman are encrypted in the spectacle of a Caribbean society. At the same time, Santos problematizes Puerto Rican national identity when she places, side by side, the Puerto Rican and Dominican political “status” difference, thus, showing that despite the Puerto Ricans’ possession of U.S. citizenship and passports, they are dangerously similar to Dominicans. Furthermore, it is the character Leocadio who at the end of the novel gains consciousness about the necessary negotiations and skills needed to survive in given sexual relations of power, despite historical violence and the traumatic effect of migration, as he accesses and eventually inhabits or takes residence in the gay hotel and disco. Although the ending is uncertain, since Leocadio may or may not become a transvestite, the possibility exists that he will echo or mirror Sirena Selena’s drag persona and career or even follow her/his footsteps to Puerto Rico or New York.

After all, it is clear that Arroyo’s notion of “cultural drag” is an efficient theoretical tool, used to uncover the construction of identities and cultural imaginaries in the Caribbean, and to visualize the danger that such performative subjectivities and



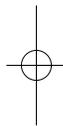


homoerotic bodies pose to heteronormality, cultural identities, and nationalist projects. In this sense, Arroyo's conceptualization of "cultural drag" coincides with Díaz definition of transvestism as a performative and cultural act that reconstitutes "that other skin, another way of being and existence that we all desire and/or repress, that grabs hold in some way or another of the sign that leads us to auscultate and feel the rhythm of differentiated rituals; [it is a positioning] where one can be aware of the drama of the most marginal and eccentric Puerto Rican modernity (and this time also that one of the Dominican Republic) and through which we are forced to move away from the comfortable and foundational imaginary identity (indeed, another form of transvestism in itself) that Power, tradition, and the phallogocentric canon confer to us" (my translation).

Efraín Barradas, a well-known Puerto Rican critic in the U.S., proposes in his article "*Sirena Selena vestida de pena o el Caribe como travesti*" an allegorical reading of the novel. Instead of approaching the text as a realist document, or comparing it to picaresque models, or even defining it as a fitting example of the bildungsroman (the apprenticeship or coming-of-age novel), he presents what may be understood as his own "risky," "preposterous," "erratic," "heretic," and "nonsensical" interpretation: for him, the novel can be read as a modern allegory of the Hispanic Caribbean from a Boricua viewpoint. In a genealogical journey Barradas compares *Sirena Selena* to Eugenio María de Hostos's allegorical novel *La peregrinación de Bayoán* (1863), where the author symbolically baptizes the islands under the names of Bayoán (Puerto Rico), Guarionex (Santo Domingo), and Marién (Cuba) in order to address their oppressive colonial condition under the Spanish imperial regime and its colonial injustice. According to the critic, Santos endorses a pan-Antillean vision without a full allegorical representation because Cuba is not spatially included in the novel; nevertheless, he observes that Cuba makes its synecdochical presence in Chapter 5 when the author describes an exiled Cuban drag queen and her/his drag shows at Bachelors, a gay club in San Juan.

It is crucial here to indicate that Hostos is mentioned in the novel at the moment that Martha Divine expresses her/his frustration at not finding Sirena Selena, who has run away from her/his vigilance to perform at Hugo's party: "Aquí se queda enterradita, al lado de Hostos" (228). Although Barradas relegates this ironic joke to a footnote, it mockingly operates as a tangential fleeing discursive paradigm that corroborates his own thesis. Moreover, this reference works as if Santos purposely and perversely has assaulted and parodied the symbolism of the national hero, de-essentializing any attempt to conceive of a centered, monolithic, coherent, and homogeneous Puerto Rican national identity and discursive formation by the mere fact that such a "gran prócer" is not even buried in his native soil. In this context, the statement achieves its ultimate sacrilegious ironic pun with the bad faith, wished entombment of the queer Other next to the national hero. At last, within the literary imaginary, this displacement, which subverts macho heterocentric monumental history, insinuates that the homosexual outcast has a place in the history of the nation, implying between the lines that, like it or not, "todos/as somos hijos/as de la (madre) patria." For Barradas, such ironic comment only points to the Antillean consciousness of the character (Martha Divine) and the narrative voice.

Barradas backs his allegorical interpretation with two arguments. First, the text is a modern novel that does not fit in the traditional definition of classical allegory; nevertheless, its political content, linked to the aesthetics of popular culture, as Lidia Santos has theorized in *Kitsch Tropical*, allows for national or continental allegories to be embedded in mass culture and kitsch. Second, he quotes Santos, who openly



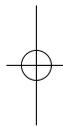


affirms in an interview that the notion of transvestism offers her a model encompassing Caribbean and Latin American countries as transvestite entities, adopting ways of doing and seeing from the First World that do not fit them in order to escape their reality.⁴ Certainly, Santos emphasizes in this declaration the unavoidable simulacrum of modernity in the Third World. For Barradas, the political message of the novel, its realist underpinning, the extensive Dominican migration to Puerto Rico, and the fact that it is impossible for drag queens to bring a show to Cuba explains the exclusion of Cuba.

Barradas's critical reading gains acute relevance when he centers on the role and effects of tourism in the Caribbean, where the tourism industry imposes a given form of transvestism. Under these circumstances, tourism transforms the islands into commercial theme parks for those in search of exoticism, folklore, and Otherness, besides turning Caribbean reality and bodies into a commodity, as objects of consumption and desire. Not only that, as he rightfully indicates, tourism has also altered the Caribbean social environment through the introduction of sexual practices that range from prostitution to gay lifestyles. The novel portrays an allegory of the tourism industry in the Caribbean in specific historical moments: Puerto Rico appears as the undisputed paradigm of the tourist industry, as personified in Martha Divine, who brings for profit her/his show to the Dominican Republic, which represents the embryonic stage of the tourism industry and the inescapable penetration of its new sexual behaviors; and Cuba operates as the nostalgic reminder of the beginning of the American tourist industry in the Caribbean of the past, the Cuba before Castro. These historic imperial interventions are embodied in each character: Sirena Selena is Puerto Rico (the present), Leocadio is the Dominican Republic (the future), and the nameless drag queen in black face (another past form of transvestism) is Cuba (the past). From this perspective, for Barradas, *Sirena Selena* is a deeply political text where transvestism, as allegory, uncovers given relations of power, debunks sexuality and gender as social constructs, unsettles hierarchical orders, exposes both sexual and national identities in all their fluidity and complexity, and even reveals how transvestism in the Caribbean can inscribe a form of survival per se. Most important, Santos's novel participates in a project intended to redefine Puerto Rican identity, which has been embedded in a politics of identity, feminism, and cultural theory.

If Luis Felipe Díaz dared to open a space in academia for a queer discursive performance by means of the intervention of his transvestite persona Lizza Fernanda, José Delgado Costa also dares to assault the solemn rhetorical discursive domain and magisterial protocol of the Ivory Tower. In his essay "Fredí Velásques le mete mano a *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*," his strategy is to stage a hilarious and campy act of ventriloquism: he assumes the voice of Fredí Velásques, a professor who delivers a lecture at a U.S. university in which he analyzes for the students the novel *Sirena Selena*, in preparation for the students to be quizzed on the subject. He employs colloquial phrases of Puerto Rican jargon, anglicisms, popular culture clichés, vulgar and sexually explicit expressions, jokes, and double entendres that "queerly" undermine the seriousness of literary and theoretical scholars and their approaches and textual analysis. The irony is that he is successful in offering the reader (and the students) a critical reading of the novel full of jokes and lively entertainment. He proves, in other words, that lecturing in academia and literary analysis in the classroom can be fun, accessible, and not at all boring.

Delgado/Velásques centers on three fundamental propositions that must be taken into consideration for understanding the structure, the style, the generic properties,

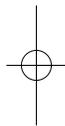




the action, the psychological traits of the characters, and the ideological infrastructure of the novel. These thematic coordinates are first, the prominence of binary constructions in the text; second, its classification as an example of a picaresque bildungsroman; and third, its ideologico-political content, which can be explained with the application of Fredric Jameson's theoretical proposal to analyze Third World literature in his article "Third-world Literature in the Era of Multi-national Capitalism" (1986). His analysis of the binary relationships in the text clearly elucidates how the characters interact, intersect, and complement each other, giving meaning to their actions and the plot as a whole. However, as for the novel being an illustration of the bildungsroman, the utilization of the genre should not only be seen in universal terms, as Delgado contends. It would be interesting to see how far Santos, as an African-Puerto Rican female writer, subverts and/or parodies the dominant patriarchal paradigm of the coming-of-age novel, a predominantly white male genre which relegates women, people of color, and queers to invisibility and the margin; and how she appropriates and alters the genre with a new politics of identity and representation by introducing her young transvestite protagonist, who is anchored in given colonial relations of power and migratory experiences.⁵ Does Sirena Selena, as a subaltern social outsider, have access to power and privilege just as white male protagonists do in the male, heterosexual-centered bildungsroman? (Of course, it should be made clear that Sirena Selena still has privilege as an American citizen and as a man.)

As for considering *Sirena Selena* as a picaresque novel, it should also be taken into consideration that the Spanish *novela picaresca* model, emblemized in *La vida del Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554), Mateo Alemán's *El Guzmán de Alfarache* (1599, 1604) and Francisco de Quevedo's *Historia de la vida del Buscón, llamado don Pablos* (1626) is also male centered and the product of a homophobic cultural environment; moreover, it is not a universal genre but is rather ideologically contextualized in specific socio-economic and historic junctures—i.e., through the crisis of aristocracy and a burgeoning compulsive desire for social climbing at the crux of new social formations and new mappings of the Castilian modern urban space and bourgeois subjecthood and its eminent individualism.⁶ Furthermore, it would be a fruitful area to explore how *Sirena Selena* relates to Luis Zapata's *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1979), one of the first Latin American openly gay novels, where the protagonist is a gay *p caro* and the text engages in a conscious intertextual dialogue with the genre with the purpose of homosexualizing it. And it cannot be forgotten that there are two other works that establish an intertextual relationship with *Sirena Selena*: Manuel Puig's *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976), which entangles its gay protagonist in popular mass culture and kitsch, just as Santos does with *Sirena Selena* and the bolero genre; and Carlos Varo's *Rosa Mystica* (1987), whose narrative concerns transvestism and transsexuality. One of the protagonists of *Rosa Mystica* is a Puerto Rican transsexual named Junior/Divina, whose sexuality intersects with her/his national identity.⁷ As s/he says: "Yo soy boricua, nacida y criada en Puerto Rico. Yo soy de allá. Sabol. Yo soy Divina. Yo soy puer-torriqueña, soy riqueña, borinqueña. Soy Portorra. I'm P.R. Una isla tan pequeña, y con tantos nombres... Que si por nombre fuera, tiempo hace que debiéramos saber quiénes somos y dónde vamos. Lo que pasa es que sobran patrioterros y falta patria" (43). Later in the novel he writes: "Que a veces pienso que yo soy como el Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico: ni canne ni pescao" (145).

Delgado's third point regarding the novel merits further reflection. Jameson's theoretical thesis formulates the premise that "all" Third World literature is





“necessarily” allegorical, “a form long discredited in the west” (324), and must be read as national allegories, given that this literature, which the author sees as “situational and materialist despite itself” (336),—is directly linked to the political, contrary to First World texts, which privilege the private and the libidinal. As he states, “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (320). Jameson highlights the central point that in the Third World the role and function of the intellectual is in one way or another political, that is, the writer is a political militant “who produces both poetry and praxis” (325), that narrative closure vectors futurity while appealing to collective identity and a collective national project, and that some works may display “generic discontinuities” (334) and unexpected endings. After applying Jameson’s thesis, Delgado persuasively concludes that *Sirena Selena* is the confirmation of a Puerto Rican literary national allegory: “esta historia de travestis es una alegoría de la condición de travesti que adopta el Caribe como paraíso de turistas y como puerto de turismo sexual para de allí dotarse económicamente. ¿Es eso, sí o no, un factor del poscolonialismo or *what?*” We find ourselves once again face to face with the same allegorical reading that Barradas proposed and demonstrated. Besides, it is undeniable that Santos, like the Puerto Rican writers from the 1970s mentioned above, seems condemned to place herself, *quiera o no*, in relation to the national identity issue and that the ideological content in her literary praxis is pre-determined by the colonial status of the island. However, as Díaz has attentively observed, Santos’s relationship to national identity is charged with ironic distancing. (I would prefer to call it an ideological “nationalist hangover.”)

On the other hand, by being part of a new generation’s efforts, Santos’s work is a deliberate detachment and derailment from a national ideological platform and didactic mission.⁸ This is thoroughly expressed in her introduction to an anthology of new literary voices from the 1990s, “Mal(h)ab(l)ar: Muestra de nueva literatura puertorriqueña” (1996), which, according to her, prioritizes irony, parody, pastiche, genre mixture, the body, and a nomadic *écriture*. It is imperative to quote in full from this introduction in order to understand the poetics at work in *Sirena Selena* and how her generation differs from the 1960s and 1970s, and from the literary model that Jameson has in mind as pertinent to Cuba and Africa. In her own words:

Hay una ubicación distinta de la función del escritor, una resistencia (incapacidad, comentan algunos críticos) a definir la literatura como medio aleccionador, versión correcta de la historia, o representación de la nación y de los grupos marginados. Estos se apartan de la definición de la literatura como un medio para educar o para formar naciones. Más bien, el espacio literario se ve como un intento de comunicar visiones alternas a las ya domesticadas por los medios de comunicación, el mercado y el estado, aún en sus versiones más ‘radicales’. Desde la página se busca un espacio para ensayar, experimentar y explorar el conocimiento **propio** de las experiencias particulares y sus conexiones con distintos mundos habitados y transitados por el lenguaje. Estos escritores ven lo literario como una textualidad que entra en conversación con distintos espacios del conocimiento—el popular, el cotidiano, el experiencial, el erudito, el mitológico/alegórico, el político—no para elevarlos a categoría letrada o ponerse a sus servicios, sino para participar



de ellos desde la colindancia con lo literario. El nuevo escritor no habla a ni en **representación** de sino **desde**. También se acrecienta el interés por los segmentos, en vez de los cimientos. Los textos de estos escritores evidencian un interés por los lugares discontinuos y quizás contradictorios donde se encuentra una autoridad de conocimiento, bien sea erudita, íntima, experiencial o popular. Por ello, sus procesos de autorización no son genealógicos, sino de otra índole. Les interesa menos su linaje literario (quiénes son sus padres o madres de letras), que autorizarse a través de una práctica de excelencia literaria y de incorporación de distintos saberes.⁹ (3)

No doubt that Santos here lays out a literary manifesto that distances and differentiates from her previous generation of writers. Nevertheless, at the same time and ironically, Santos's insistence on explaining her novel in allegorical terms betrays and contradicts her attempts for a radical rupture, placing her work in a direct relationship to the canon and national identity. There is more here than meets the eye: in a certain way, there is in place an ideological dislocation and a conceptualization of a radical individualist intellectual praxis which, in turn, puts into question Jameson's generalization about the role of the intellectual in the Third World. Perhaps this could be understood as the result of transnationalism and a transglobal economy, the collapse of communist utopia and socialist agendas, and the presence of Third World literature as another commodity in a global market. Also, this puts into question Jameson's utopian reading of the Third World literature, which is inserted on a Marxist model of center and periphery and ignores the constant contradictions, negotiations, and transformations of cultural, political, ideological, and political processes in the Third World. In addition, as Doris Sommer and other critics have observed, Jameson's thesis is problematic "since clearly some 'third-world' texts are not 'national allegories'" and "since 'national allegories' are still written in the First World" (42).

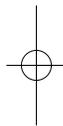
Although Delgado accurately observes that *Sirena Selena* presents the binary structure of the private and the public and the sexual and the economic that Jameson gives emphasis to differentiate literary texts from the First and Third World, he does not exactly relate it to Jameson's thesis; he makes it clear, however, that the erotic and the economic intersect in the novel through business deals and the exploitation of sexual desire. He even goes further in his analysis by stating that *Sirena Selena* in the eyes of Martha Divine is solely a commodity and that *Sirena Selena*, being well aware of it, abandons her/him after profiting from her/his seduction of Hugo. Then, how can we apply Jameson's thesis if the novel lacks any notion of collectivity or solidarity at the end? (The point is well noticed by Delgado.) Indeed, the characters' private interests and desire for financial independence show that bourgeois individualism and capitalism have infiltrated and are already in place in the Caribbean, and that such individualism seems to project itself into the near future with Migueles's managerial potential, Leocadio's ambiguous sexuality and obsession with the "out of his reach" gay disco, the reader's premonition that Leocadio will become the next drag queen, Martha Divine's intuition of Leocadio becoming a future star, and her/his business partnership with Stan, with the possibility of exporting to the Dominican Republic Puerto Rican drag queens whose American citizenship and passports guarantee easy entry to the island. Even Hugo's interaction with foreign capital and Stan's ownership of a gay hotel manifest the already present imperial penetration and rooting of capitalist finance in the Dominican Republic.



One more point: Jameson's observation of the destabilization of genres as a result of capitalist intrusion in the cultural imaginary of the Third World deserves further thought, given that *Sirena Selena* violates traditional genre conventions and eludes any easy categorization. Is it a confessional novel? a bildungsroman? a *novela picaresca*? a fictional *testimonio*? a "lite" novel? And in discursive and literary terms: is it a parody of the bolero? Is it a transvestitized, counterfeit rendering of the Latin American national foundational allegorical romances of the nineteenth century?¹⁰ Is it a postmodern response to *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*? More questions surface when considering the exigencies of genre and the horizon of expectation that each dictates and presumes within and beyond the ending of the novel: Will Sirena Selena remain caught in the trap of colonial dependency? What does her/his migration to New York City truly imply and signify? Will s/he achieve economic independence and sexual liberation? Will s/he become a Diva? What about her/his migration and integration in the mythical "land of opportunity" and gay mecca that is New York City? What about her/his positionality as a subaltern in the capitalist social space, which is also the final destination for the absolute liberation for most Puerto Rican drag queens who dream of performing at La Escuelita and Lucho's or even crossing over to Lips in the Greenwich Village, as is the case of Mirkala Crystal and Lizza Fernanda? Or are Sirena Selena and Leocadio condemned to a colonial economic dependence that replicates the imperial economic dynamics in the Caribbean? Clearly this novel closes with an interrogative ending.¹¹ The reader does not even know if Sirena Selena's opening monologue in the first chapter takes place in New York City. A close analysis of the surface and deep structure of the novel would be the first steps in answering the previous possible critical inquiries, which I do not simply pose as mere rhetorical questions. Kristian Van Haesendonck's essay, which follows Delgado's, moves forward in this sense, in theoretically approaching the novel's structural units, narrative sequences, and ideological framework.

Van Haesendonck employs A. J. Greimas's structuralist theoretical apparatus, known as the "actantial model," which centers on the analysis of the narrative sequences, that is, the inventory of events that generate the plot as it advances from disharmony to resolution or separation to reunion, as well as the typological roles and function of the characters and their binary oppositional interrelationship. By assigning characters their allocation in a binary oppositional scheme composed of six actants—Subject (looking for the Object), Object (looked for by the Subject), Sender (of the Subject on its quest for the Object), Receiver (of the Object to be secured by the Subject), Helper (of the Subject) and Opponent (of the Subject)—Greimas assembles a readable grammar of the plot and its semiotic unfolding, which can be configured into a semiotic square or diagram.¹² In this structural scheme, "each pair epitomizes a fundamental narrative element: subject/object refers to desire, sender/receiver to communication, and helper/opponent to secondary assistance or interference"¹³ (Paul Innes, "Actant," 13).

Having applied the above actantial model to *Sirena Selena*, Van Haesendonck graphically demonstrates the narrative syntax and operations that comprise and describe Sirena Selena's positionings and interactions with other characters based upon their given desires, knowledge, and obligations in pursuit of their goals or aspirations. Among his principal findings of the plot's structural mechanisms, the following stand out: both Martha Divine and Sirena Selena's actions are motivated by their desire to overcome their economic limitations and obtain social mobility; drag shows are the means to achieve their dreams (glamor for Sirena Selena and a sex



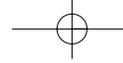


change for Martha Divine); Martha Divine's alliance with Contreras results from her/his aim to complete her/his sexual surgical operation; Contreras becomes Martha Divine's opponent as he delays the confirmation of the contract for Sirena Selena's show at the hotel; Hugo functions as an obstacle in Sirena Selena's goal to become a diva and accomplish her integration into a glamorous life; Hugo represents Martha Divine's opponent in her future plans; and so on.

In a fascinating theoretical move, Van Haesendonck also applies Greimas's actantial model to the political and ideological macrocosm of the novel. In this manner, like Barradas and Delgado, he also pays close attention to the allegorical subtext of the novel. (Despite Van Haesendonck's forcing an allegorical interpretation of the text by seeing the three dresses in Sirena Selena's suitcase as embodiment of the three political alternatives for Puerto Rico—Commonwealth, Statehood, or Independence—and comparing Martha Divine to the father figure of Luis Muñoz Marín, such over-reading does not undermine his theoretical approach.) For him, the body of the transvestite inscribes the ambiguous and conflictive political Commonwealth status of Puerto Rico (ELA): Puerto Rico, as a desiring subject, faces colonialism both as a helper and an opponent in the process of its integration into the First World and networks of globalization. The outcome of Puerto Rico's historical condition is an act of transvestism that converts the island and its subjects into a (neo)colonial (transvestite) nation. Such a political state of affairs (ELA)—known to some as *colonialismo lite*—produces new economic dependencies as well as new strategies of survival and “*nuevas formas de bregar*.”

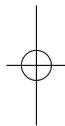
Under these circumstances, presupposing the failed colonial apparatus that is Puerto Rico, national identity is circumscribed to the parameters of simulacrum and spectacle, which ironically accommodate the possibility of agency and decolonization as allegorized in Sirena Selena's own transvestism. Likewise, within this allegorical reading, Sirena Selena's migration to the Dominican Republic not only duplicates the transmigrations in the Caribbean, as Van Haesendonck indicates, the move also recovers the syncretism of the bolero musical genre. As a performer and a transvestite, Sirena Selena's diasporic experience intertwines the national and the private, sustaining the critic's allegorical interpretation: “[E]l bolero es también sincretismo de las diásporas caribeñas... El bolero permite abordar la problemática nacional desde la intimidad, mientras que la figura del travesti expresa las ambigüedades de las naciones caribeñas a finales de siglo en medio de la violencia de la globalización. En la novela la figura del travesti-bolerista traduce la inestabilidad económica y social del Caribe, así como la sensación de desarraigo constante del ser caribeño.” Evidently, Jameson's thesis, that in Third World literature “*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*” (320), is applicable here. One thing is for sure: if Sirena Selena is a text that cannot break away totally from the issue of national identity, it nonetheless registers the articulation of a Caribbean identity in a multiplicity of displacements and transgressions, within and beyond the borders of the national territory; this time the novel is seen from the intimate and sentimental sphere of the bolero and the seductive and ambiguous body of the transvestite in all its performativity, spectacle, and postmodern simulacrum.

Daniel Torres, poet, novelist, and critic, is the author of the last essay included in this group. Let's start by saying that his interpretation is a scandalous and delicious exercise in search of the erotic foundation in the novel. Taking as its premise Santos's feminism and the female desiring body, Torres centers on the pleasures, transgressions,



and ambiguities of the text. He postulates that the erotic liberation and bodily pleasures inscribed in the novel makes possible the undoing of gender hierarchies and traditional gender roles. This is possible because of the presence of the figure of the transvestite, within whom multiple sexual practices collide, and in whom phallogocentrism, patriarchy, and heteronormality are challenged and disrupted. According to Torres, Sirena Selena's act of sodomy at the end of the novel gives her/him the necessary agency to affirm her/his queer subjectivity. At that moment, after a long and meditated plan and strategic display of seduction, the final encounter between Sirena Selena and Hugo creates a *mise en abîme* that dynamites sexual expectations and gendered ascribed properties: the one thought to be the passive one in the sexual act plays the active role. By penetrating Hugo, Sirena Selena explodes the customarily assumed stereotypes that circulate in a patriarchal world that is maintained, enforced, and perpetuated through differentiated gender roles between men and women. In this manner, the transvestite breaks away from the assumption that s/he simply replicates and reenacts the passivity attributed to women in patriarchy. For Torres, it is wrong to assume that the transvestite implies the loss of masculinity. In simple words: Sirena Selena dismounts and dismembers the stereotype by mounting Hugo and penetrating him with her/his huge penis. As a result of this unexpected inversion a certain balance is achieved between the predicated feminine passivity of the transvestite inscribed in the surface image of her/his mask and the active role of penetration executed once s/he is naked. This means that Sirena Selena's nakedness uncovers, reflects, and refracts her/his androgyny and ambiguous sexual hybridization—half man, half woman—which echoes her/his own name Sirena—half woman/half fish. In turn, such imagery constitutes the notion of difference and alterity that is inscribed in the figure of the transvestite.

Torres accurately observes that Sirena Selena reacts abruptly when Hugo calls her/him Sirenito because s/he is not willing to claim her/his place in traditional masculinity. Also, Hugo is attracted to Sirena because he desires the image of a woman with a biological twist: "El acto sexual finalmente nos revela quiénes somos en realidad y al dar placer a Hugo Graubel, y recibirlo, Sirena Selena se enfrenta ante la realidad insolayable de que su cuerpo biológico guarda todavía el germen de la masculinidad y es esa ambigüedad latente de ser una mujer con pene es lo que ha conquistado precisamente a Graubel." From this vantage point, Santos's eroticism shatters the stereotype that all transvestites are passive, takes apart traditional taboos, and exposes the practices of *enclosetamiento* in the Caribbean. According to Torres, the disappearing act of Sirena Selena at the end of the novel truly reveals an attempt to unreservedly recognize bisexuality and the possibility of transcending gender constructions and the limits of the body. If I understand Torres's interpretation correctly, this open and interrogative ending poses the continual questioning of sexual behaviors without regulating sexual encounters or prohibiting perverse desire. Isn't it the total liberation of the body, repressed desire, and eroticism that Santos advocates in her writing through the imagery, poetics, and model of the transvestite? Indeed, Santos offers in her novel a scandalous subversion and liberation that can be achieved through the practice of transvestism—the ultimate embodiment of erotic desire and emancipation of gendered oppression.

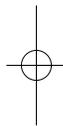




What better way to close this essay than with Mayra's own voice and words. I use the first name intentionally. Indeed, Mayra is the kind of person who invites proximity and informality. As she has stated, one of her goals is to undo the aloofness of writers: "... el pensar en el escritor como una elite intelectual inaccesible me molesta, no me gusta que la literatura se vea como un lujo para unos cuantos. Así que prefiero correrme el riesgo del faranduleo que el del elitismo" ("Mayra: rostro de la literatura," 24).

Last May, at the Fifth Encuentro Internacional de Escritoras, Clara Lair con Julia de Burgos: Más allá de las fronteras in San Juan, Mayra delivered the concluding remarks at the end of an unprecedented women's literary conference that brought together novelists, poets, and scholars, among them the prominent writers Nancy Morejón and Gioconda Belli.¹⁴ It was a steamy night and the final scheduled event started with the usual delay that characterizes *nuestro tiempo latino*. After a wait of one hour, impatience was in the air, as well as hunger. But once Mayra took center stage, her speech and performance possessed the audience. Her presence and delivery immediately took over. She was informal and professional, colloquial and theoretical, amusing and serious. Most important, she was intelligent, honest, *sabia*. She entertained us but made us think critically about issues of women's writing, feminism, sexual liberation, gender and body politics, racism, marginality, colonial exploitation, consumerism, globalization, sexual and bodily pleasure, eroticism, politics of identity, strategies of survival, and laughter. Her beautifully written piece was a tribute to her mother, to women of color, and to all women marginalized, enslaved, and objectified under patriarchy, through gender practices, institutionalized racisms, and medicine. Mayra received a standing ovation and endless cheers. She saved the night. She made my night. In an exchange with the audience, concerning her secrets and inspirations, Mayra enchanted them with judicious and heartfelt spontaneity: "¿Qué me motiva para escribir? La inseguridad porque soy muy culona." "Yo nací para escribir. Esa fé me mantiene. Yo no sé sumar... Y mi mamá." "Las ideas me vienen de la gente. Vivo enamorada de mi país." "Nadie sufre más que nadie." "La comemierdería me da coraje." "La sabiduría viene de muchas partes. Soy media santera." "No le tengo miedo al ridículo. No creo en la perfección. No quiero ser diosa." But that evening she was a goddess. And one by one, those in the audience wanted to touch her, to feel her, to breathe her energy and joy. When it was my turn, I congratulated her. I said: "Estuviste genial. Divina. Y ahora estás como el agua bendita." And Mayra asked why. I responded: "Porque todo el mundo quiere meter la mano. Te canonizaste, te altarizaste." And I kissed her. The following Monday we had lunch and I asked her for the essay. And without any hesitation and a life-giving smile she agreed. And here it is.

The story does not end there. At the conference I met a young woman, Teresa Peña-Jordán, who is working on her doctoral thesis "Texts, Bodies, and Power: Antipatriarchal Biopolitics in Cuba and Puerto Rico during the Twentieth Century" at the University of Pittsburg. We sat together during Mayra's speech. She did not know Mayra, and I said I would let Mayra know that she wanted to interview her for her dissertation research. I told Mayra and she graciously agreed. And they met. Included here is Teresa's interview "Romper la verja, meterse por los poros, infectar." Surely it complements the critical readings above on *Sirena Selena* and Mayra's essay. It allows us to get to know Mayra from another perspective and to understand her literary and critical practices. Her generosity and her support of a younger generation are attributes that I respect and admire more and more as days go by. Moreover, I also identify with her view of academia: "No creo en el mito de la razón ni en las





jerarquías que apoya y sostiene. Así que me río un poco de lo erudito, lo 'inteligente', etc. Espero que esa sea otra de las cualidades que se dejan percibir en mi narrativa” (“Literatura para curar,” 3). Once you read her essay included here, you will realize the importance of laughter in Mayra’s work and philosophy of life. Enjoy the reading.



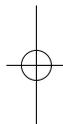
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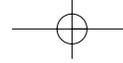
¹ After receiving a doctoral degree from Cornell University in 1991, Santos returned to the island to teach at the University of Puerto Rico. She has also taught at Cornell (1993) and Berkeley (1993). In Puerto Rico she writes literary and cultural essays in English for the single English newspaper with a major readership *The San Juan Star* and in Spanish mainly for *Claridad*, *Diálogo*, *Piso 13*, and *El nuevo día*. Santos has made excellent contributions to Puerto Rican Cultural Studies with scholarly articles that center on literature and music (rap and salsa). Both her creative writing and scholarly contributions are extensively read in the U.S., Latin America, and Spain. Presently, she is preparing an anthology of her poetry (from 1991–2002). It will include her books of poetry that are out of print and her unpublished poetry. She is also working on two historical novels based on two Puerto Rican women, Isabel Luberta Oppenheimer (Isabel La Negra), a legendary Puerto Rican figure who was a prostitute and owner of a famous brothel, and Luisa Nevárez Ortiz, the first woman sentenced to be hanged in Puerto Rico. She hosts a TV program, “Grado Zero,” which gives visibility to contemporary Puerto Rican poetry and music. Santos is also a mentor to young Puerto Rican writers.

² See Chapter IV “‘La casa en ruinas’ o la crisis del canon: Marqués, Ramos Otero, Ferré y Vega” (121-199).

³ Santos’s literary practice is informed by her own politics of identity and notion of translocation: “Yo no creo en las marginalidades fijas, quizás porque pertenezco a varias. Soy mujer, negra, caribeña y quién sabe qué otras cosas, cosas que más que me colocan en un margen. Pero he observado que este margen siempre es móvil. A veces estoy en el centro (por cuestiones de educación, de clase quizás) y a veces soy la abyecta (por razones de piel, por pertenecer a un país colonizado por EE.UU. Precisamente por esa movilidad me doy permiso para transitar por varios mundos, por varios márgenes, a veces hasta por el centro. Y así me conecto con la gente que, como yo, anda visitando por ahí, transgrediendo fronteras sociales” (“Literatura para curar,” 3-4).

⁴ Santos explained the metaphorical dimension of the novel in the following terms: “... utilizo el personaje de Sirena... un travesti, de dos maneras, una metafórica y otra social. 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 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 nuestro países crean esos extraños exilios emocionales” (“Las ciudades de América Latina,” 1).





⁵ Scholars agree that the genre centers on the development of the protagonist from childhood to maturity. Wilhelm Dilthey defines the bildungsroman in the following terms: “A regulated development within the life of the individual is observed, each of its stages has its own intrinsic value and it is at the same time the basis for a higher stage. The dissonances and conflicts of life appear as the necessary growth points through which the individual must pass on the way to maturity and harmony.” See Sandoval-Sanchez and Sternbach, *Stages of Life*, pp. 66-68, where we discuss the evolution of the genre and its applicability to U.S. Latina theatre.

⁶ See José A. Maravall’s *La literatura picaresca desde la historia social* for a detailed study of the *p. caro* and its socio-historical background.

⁷ I highly recommend Gelpí’s article “La crisis de las categorías culturales en *Rosa Mystica*” and Ángel A. Rivera’s “Puerto Rico on the Borders: Cultures of Survival or the Survival of Culture” for two excellent critical readings of the novel.

⁸ This anthology was expanded and published as a book *Mad h d l ar: Antología de nueva literatura puertorriqueña*. In the “Introduction” Santos develops more or less the same ideas and concentrates on outlining the themes, techniques, and styles particular to each contributor. This compilation of poetry and short stories includes 24 writers.

⁹ Nonetheless, Santos has her own utopian notion of a Puerto Rican nation: “... para mí la nación en Puerto Rico sigue siendo un proyecto. Tengo algunas dificultades con el concepto de nación-estado. Una de ellas es el de inmiscuirse en terreno que por la regulación que hacen de la vida cotidiana de la gente o en espacios de vida que no deben ser reguladas por el estado. Entre estas, la sexualidad es un ejemplo. La nación en la cual yo quiero vivir es hasta cierto punto un lugar que tenga poder político para negociar favorablemente con los conglomerados de otras naciones caribeñas y latinoamericanas y también un lugar donde todos los ciudadanos, los interesados y no interesados sientan que tienen un sitio para cambiarla y modificarla, además de entrar y salir de ella libremente” (“Por el prisma,” 17).

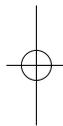
¹⁰ I have in mind Doris Sommer’s popular thesis in *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* that Latin American nineteenth century novels were part of a nation building bourgeois project and managed to function as a foundational narrative romance “to hegemonize a culture in formation” (29). For her, those canonical novels interlocked Eros and Polis, coupling national political fictions with productive heterosexual erotic desire and fantasies to engender new nations and bridge the public and private spheres. Such allegorical foundational fictions developed a narrative formula and strategies for resolving continuing racial, regional, economic, and gender conflicts during the years of consolidation. As such, these nation-building romances were a way of imagining the nation and allegorical discursive sites of hegemonic ideologies and gender politics to construct “a legitimating national culture” (46).

¹¹ For Catherine Belsey an interrogative text invites the reader to produce answers to the questions it implicitly or explicitly raises and does not lead to a form of closure: “The reader is distanced, at least from time to time, rather than wholly interpolated into a fictional world... the interrogative text refuses a single point of view, however complex and comprehensive, but brings points of view into unresolved collision or contradiction” (92).

¹² See Gerald Prince’s definitions of “actant” and “actantial model” in his *Dictionary of Narratology*, pp. 1-2.

¹³ See entry “Actant” in *A Dictionary of Culture and Critical Theory*.

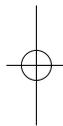
¹⁴ The conference took place on the grounds of the Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 30 April-4 May, 2003.





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