

Senior Thesis in Comparative Literature, The Colorado College

Sirena Selena, Queen of Dreams:

A Responsible Translation of Difference and Unspoken Rhetorics

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Translator's Note

I. An Introduction to this Translation

When it was published in 2000, the academic community and the Puerto Rican queer community met *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, by Mayra Santos-Febres, with critical acclaim. It is a novel about a young transgender singer's efforts to make a life for herself with the tools at hand. Although Stephen Lytle produced an English-language translation in 2000, few English-speaking readers outside of the sphere of Caribbean Studies are familiar with this novel. My translation of sections of *Sirena Selena* seeks to better preserve the constantly shifting gender identification of the protagonist. This is a practice I put to work in this discussion by referring the novel's protagonist, Sirena Selena, with alternatingly male and female pronouns and at times omitting them altogether.

The novel shifts narrators from chapter to chapter with no indication to the reader, and includes a number of flashbacks, primarily of Sirena's life. In my selections, I only include one flashback, chapter 20, which takes the form of a monologue by Sirena's mentor and surrogate mother, Martha Divine. The remainder of my selections focus on the complete arc of Sirena's journey, from her arrival in the Dominican Republic from Puerto Rico, to his presumed departure. I also included the first and last chapters from the story of Leocadio, a young Dominican boy whose nascent exploration of gender identity mirrors Sirena's own life experience. For the reader's convenience, I include brief explanations of plot development between each scene.

In addition, I leave the *bolero* that Sirena sings in chapter 37 in the original Spanish, both to preserve a sense of cultural context and so that the reader can recognize the poetry of its rhyme scheme. The bolero is originally a Cuban musical form, although it draws from both Spanish Roma and African musical roots. Since its development in the late 19th century, the genre has become a trans-Caribbean art form, performed by both men and women from across the region (Arroyo 43). As an expression of both love and pain, “Nave sin rumbo” by Silvia Rexach (1958), is a powerful piece that Spanish-speaking readers of the original text would likely have already been familiar with before reading this novel. In order to capture a similar thematic recognition and familiarity in the English version, I have included my own translation of “Nave sin rumbo” at the beginning of my translation.

II. Rendering Binary Gender Language in English

As mentioned above, this novel shifts constantly between male and female pronouns in reference to its titular character. These changes sometimes conform to one character’s subjective narration and at other times shift from passage to passage according to subtle changes of context. In some cases, differently gendered words describe Sirena within the same phrase, as in the sentence: “Aquella mañana, él se había ido a la playa de Bocachica sola” (Santos-Febres 58). Here the subject of the sentence is masculine (él), but the adjective is in the feminine form (sola). Without the existence of gendered adjectives in the English, the translator must choose between maintaining a consistent gender in this passage and recreating a new means of expressing the shift. Lytle’s translation maintains feminine pronouns throughout the entirety of Chapter 9, and this line is therefore rendered, “That morning, she had gone to Bocachica beach alone”

(42). By changing the masculine (él) to the feminine (she), Lytle erases the surprising, confusing, and playful effect of the original. It is for this reason that my own translation of this line, “That morning, he had gone to Bocachica beach by herself,” attempts to retain both the presence and effect of Santos-Febres’ binary gender language.

Perhaps even more challenging for the English translator, Santos-Febres frequently does not refer to her protagonist’s gender for pages at a time. While Spanish grammatical construction can easily avoid both gendered pronouns and possessives, English demands a pronoun at the beginning of each sentence. As a result, my translation frequently imposes gender. The original text of Chapter 37, for example, contains only 13 indications of Sirena’s gender. My translation contains 75 indications of gender. Because each of the original 13 indications are female, I choose to maintain a consistently feminine language in this chapter. In the other passages that lack gender indicators altogether, such as the end of chapter 47, I choose simply to alternate between male and female pronouns. Wherever it is possible to do so without sounding forced, I simply avoid gendered language. Take the genderless line in chapter 47: “La ninfa calla. Boca afuera deja de cantar, pero por dentro intenta tararear una tonada de amor” (254). In this case, Lytle again shows his tendency to favor a consistent gender, rendering the line: “The nymph grows quiet. On the outside she refrains from singing, but inside she tries to sing a love song” (205). In contrast, I played off of Santos-Febres’ poetic construction to avoid a gendered pronoun or possessive: “The nymph stops. On the outside, the mouth swallows its song, but from within it tries to murmur a melody of love.” Although here I move the agency of the line from Sirena herself to “the mouth,” I hope that by mimicking Santos-Febres’ alliteration in “dentro intenta tararear una tonada” with “swallows its

song” and “murmur a melody,” I succeed in both recreating the lyricism of this line and avoiding an explicit statement of Sirena’s gender.

Altogether, my efforts to reflect the complex use of gendered language in *Sirena Selena* require me to handle my translation more creatively, at times inserting phrases and writing around the obvious translation. I hope that my text, like the source text, is subtly indicative of both the external mechanisms surrounding Sirena, which push her from one side of the gender binary to the other, and of his own agency in crafting a constantly shifting gender identity.

III. Translating Code-Switching

Along with the unorthodox use of binary gender language, perhaps the next most striking element of my translation is the number of words I have left untranslated and thus italicized. Because Puerto Rico has such a close, complex relationship with the United States, the source text is full of *anglicismos*. Just take the opening line of chapter 20, when Martha Divine asks her audience if they are “¿Todo bien, todo fabulous, todo too much?” (Santos-Febres 111). Because these omnipresent English words and phrases are an integrated element of the characters’ linguistic expression, I decided to retain select Spanish words and expressions in order to mirror the source text’s use of English.

This decision both reflects the code-switching of the source text and acknowledges basic Spanish as mainstream knowledge in the United States. I have been intentional in the words I choose to leave in Spanish; they center on identity, relationships, and cultural practices specific to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. I leave most pet names and family designations in Spanish as markers of intimacy and to

emphasize the importance of family relationships, both biological ties and the surrogate family structures within the marginalized gay community. In addition, I leave nouns related to sexual and gender identity without translation. While many of these words are derived from English phrases, such as *closetero* for those still in the closet, *draga* for drag queen, and *bucha* for butch lesbian, their Spanish permutations retain connotations specific to the local context. To simply translate them back into English would lose their regionally specific ingenuity.

In particular, the word most commonly used to describe Sirena's gender identity, *travesti*, has no English equivalent, although it is most closely related to "transvestite." *Travesti* is both a noun and adjective derived from the verb *travestirse*, itself a colloquial portmanteau of "trans-" and "vestirse," or "to dress." It refers to the act of dressing and conducting oneself as the opposite gender, but is distinct from being a *draga*, a person who uses drag as an artistic element of a performance or a *loca*, a member of Sirena's gender-bending community more generally. The word *travesti* has close ties to the identities that share its "trans-" prefix, *transexual* and *transgénero*, which correspond roughly to the English "transsexual" and "transgender." At the same time, a person who identifies as *travesti* does not necessarily wish to spend all their time living in one gender identity or the other. While, in my translation, I could have chosen rough English equivalents such as "transvestite," "gender fluid," "intergender," or "non-binary," none of these options capture the time, place, and self-conceptualization of the characters who identify as *travesti*. For this reason, I have left vocabulary related to queer identity in particular in the original Spanish.

In some cases, I chose to retain Spanish to locate the text culturally and geographically. The opening line, for example, “Cáscara de coco, contento de jirimilla azul, por los dioses di” (7), draws heavily on Afro-Caribbean vocabulary and Santería, the uniquely Caribbean religious tradition that combines various regional African religions, primarily Yoruba and Ifá, and Spanish Roman Catholicism. The coconut shell, “Cáscara de coco,” is associated with Ochun, a major Orisha, or spirit with origins in the polytheistic Yoruba religious tradition. In Santería, she is tied to feminine sexuality, flirtation, and fertility. Similarly, “jirimilla” is a permutation of “jiribilla,” an Afro-Caribbean word that roughly translates to an inner happiness, or carrying a song inside (Castillo 7). In order to retain these connotations for the mainstream American reader, I translate this line as “Coconut hull of *Ochun*, joy of the blue *jirimilla* soul song, I gave to the gods.” Though it loses the subtlety of the original, my translation will hopefully bring readers to the specific cultural experiences captured in the novel, while still allowing them to enjoyably participate in the text.

“Nave sin rumbo”
1958, by Sylvia Rexach
Santurce, Puerto Rico

On sails my heart

On sails my heart
A ship set in the tempest of the sea
Defiant in the face of swirling storm
Of that thing that they call love.
You, lion of the sea,
in which direction do you chart its course
with you hardly worrying
about where we're wandering

Tell me, captain,
Since you know the secrets of this sea
Once we have weathered the worst of this storm
If in the calm there will be
only vast emptiness between my arms
or the fragmented flotsam of my heart

On sails my heart...

Es mi corazón

Es mi corazón
una nave en el turbulento mar,
desafiando la fuerte tempestad
de eso que llaman amor.
Tú, lobo de mar,
hacia dónde esta nave haz de llevar,
sin preocuparte apenas
que rumbo tomaremos.

Dime capitán,
tú que conoces las aguas de este mar,
si después de pasar la tempestad
quedará sobre la calma
un inmenso vacío entre mis brazos,
o tal vez un corazón hecho pedazos.

Es mi corazón...

Sirena Selena, Queen of Dreams
 By Mayra Santos Febres
 Translation by Elizabeth Conant

Chapter 1

Coconut hull of *Ochun*, joy of the blue *jirimilla* soul song, I give to the gods, sugared selena, succulent siren of the street-lit beaches, confess yourself, under a spotlight, lovely lunatic. You know the wild desires of city nights. You are the memory of remote orgasms reduced to recording rehearsals. You and your seven soulless ribbons like a photoconducting bird of insolent electrodes. You are who you are, Sirena Selena... you descend from your paper moon to sing the old songs of Lucy Favery, of Sylvia Rexach, of extravagant La Lupe, dressed and adorned by those following your footprints.



Chapter 2

In the plane, sitting like a kid next to la Martha, who is a real *Señora*, veteran of thousands of stage lights: El Cotorrito, Boccaccio's, Bachelors. Even shows in La Escuelita, 39th St, New York. She even had a husband, a regular who put her up in an apartment in El Condado. "Just like you now, *niña*, with your star on the rise. I was his decent little woman when he came to Puerto Rico from Honduras. My husband, he was a businessman. And since I have entrepreneurial blood, I learned how to keep the books from him, but I took as much as I could to start my own little business. Don't think for a second that I was going to sit around lonely when that trader got tired. Me in the street again? Never in a million years, it cost me too many *bosteaderas* already to buy the implants and hormones that make me *fabulosa*. Sorry, *nená*. I was spoiled by the good life."

Martha, a real *Señora*, his guide, his *mamá*. The mother he never had, who took him out of the street to sing in El Danubio Azul. She was tall and bleached blonde, already had wrinkles, and a magnificent pair of silicon breasts with such incredibly smooth skin for all the fissures of her neckline. Tan, with big feet, her nails were always painted garnet red, a congealed point of blood on the end of each of her fingers and toes. Not a single hair betrayed her. Only her height and her voice and her gestures, so feminine, too feminine, studiously feminine. Her teeth were perfect, without a single nicotine stain, even though she smoked without stopping. This habit could possibly explain the gravelly voice, as if millions of grains of sand had settled into her throat, in the long and well moisturized neck, already a little wrinkled, but elegant, slender in a discrete curve that ended upwards in a permed head of hair, downwards in a broad back, but a fine back of a mature woman, who had already lived many lives.

“*Vampiresa en tu novela, la gran tirana...*”, rehearsed la Sirena in the plane on the way to the Dominican Republic. They were going for business, he and Martha. His first plane ride, his first time crossing the pond. The second will be over to New York, he had a feeling. Over there to try his luck as who he really is.

And it wasn't like he had always been a streetwalker, before Martha. La Selena had a roof over his head once, but when *la abuela* died from cleaning so many rich peoples' houses, there was no one to look after him. His uncles dead, left for abroad. Mother's whereabouts unknown. Social Services wanted to take him to a home. But la Sirena knew well that there wasn't much difference between a foster home and a circle of hell. There the strongest would abuse him, would beat him, would rape him by force and then leave him thrown, bloody and half dead on dirty market floor. So Selena preferred to

make the streets his home. Before with Valentina. Then later, with Martha, his new *mamá*.

Now the two women were going to the Dominican Republic together with a business plan. Martha had taught him to save. Martha had taught him where to go for cheap foundation and wigs. Martha had made him quit the cocaine habit that left his nasal passage perforated and bloody –“*Loca*, don’t you go down that path missy”—and had offered her an option besides getting old men off in European cars. She took the bitterness out of her bearing, developed the sweetness of her voice. “You sing like an angel from heaven,” la Martha told her one emotional day, a day that Selena was gathering cans outside of the Danubio and, almost without realizing, singing one of her abuela’s *boleros*. She sang it out loud, sang it as if she were going to die when it ended, sang it to realize her own agony, as if a dying dog were singing, a leprous mutt, dying beneath a recently abandoned tire.

The *dragas* who heard the *bolero* were left open-mouthed. They were working in the street, dealing with clients. But suddenly they began to hear a murmur of pain, a bled-out agony that got into their flesh and sapped them of the presence of mind to haggle prices with the stingy, or with the waves of husbands escaping their homes. They couldn’t even remember the things that made them cry, that dissolved the glue of the lashes posed on their lids. They had to turn on their heels and bring their wigs together to hear better. That’s how, *lelas*, they managed to call their manager, Miss Martha Divine, to hear this wonder of a fag, this *bugarroncito* with the voice of a Sunday angel.

It was Lizzy Star who managed to alert Martha, with a piercing cry. She was closest to the door of the Danubio Azul, a small gay bar for derailed *travestis* that was the

property of the marvelous, the spectacular Martha Divine. It was only a question of throwing the door open and yelling “Martha, get out here, look at this”. Martha came out from the Danubio harried, prepared for the worst. She thought she was going to have to fight some policeman who was pushing around the *muchachas*, looking for an easy payoff, or that it had come to *macanazos* with some client. But no, that wasn’t it. As soon as the door closed behind her, she could hear a subtle melody holding the whole street in suspended animation. With her gaze, Martha searched for the source of such a voice. She found it. It was coming from the throat of a young man who, drugged out of his mind, was singing and looking for cans. Martha was dumbstruck like all other the queens, like all the other clients, like all the other cars passing on the street below. When she reacted, the entrepreneurial blood bubbled in her veins. She walked up to where the *muchacho* was standing, invited him into the bar for a Coke. She ordered him food, took him back to her apartment, helped him quit his drug addiction, dressed him as a *bolerosa*. Little by little she helped him transform into who he really was. And now she was taking him to the Dominican Republic because Selena had never been in a plane. They were going for business, to see if they could sell her show in a hotel. Entrepreneurial blood.

Like a kid, Selena was antsy, maybe because of the excitement of the journey, the premonition of a new life starting with the plan to present himself in another country, even if it was the next island over. He had already done a little show in the Crasholeta, had sung in private for the most luxurious *locas* of the local scene. But he was still *muy* baby about getting contracts at the hotels in the tourist zone. “I’m not even lying, *mi amor*, when I say that the federal law prohibits child labor. You didn’t know? So it’s better”—her *mamá* told her— “better for us to go to the Dominican Republic where they

won't bring up these kinds of details." And now, thanks to federal law, Sirena Selena was about to transform into a Caribbean diva. With the illusion of his song, he would awaken other yearnings in a whole new public. He would transform himself into the star of a show for four star hotels. He would have a dressing room and lights and costumes made from the finest materials ever to lend themselves to a performance. There he finally could show off his voice. *Ay* his voice, don't let his voice fail him now, *Virgen santa*, don't let it change tones, let it stay the same, sweet and clear. His friends from work at the Danubio never got tired of telling him that, from the middle of his chest, a tarnished gurgle of pain emerged, but always fresh, as ancient and as fresh as the smallest *mal de amores* on the face of the earth. Millions of people had told him millions of things about his voice. "I smell honey in your voice, fruit on your lips", an admirer had murmured one day and tried to kiss him. She had just stopped singing. She was exhausted from the stage. So she let herself be kissed. Let that man's tongue run over the hollow of her teeth, absorb the thick saliva from the cabaret night. Let him tangle his tongue with her exhausted tongue, which he was caressing to try to put a little life into it. But halfway through the kiss, Sirena noticed that this mouth was searching for something more that kisses usually look for. This mouth wanted to draw a melody out of her. It was a kiss that wanted to devour her voice.

When the admirer finished kissing her, he looked at her victoriously. Sirena reassumed her role as a mysterious woman and moved away towards the backroom that served as a dressing room for all the *dragas* of the Danubio. She swayed her slight waist, and tolerated the alien saliva in her mouth, without swallowing it, suspecting sabotage. When she arrived at her dressing room, she rinsed out her mouth with tap water, and with

Listerine. Afterwards, when she arrived at la Martha's apartment, she gargled rose and magnolia petals with garlic to get rid of any enemy bacteria that may have been left wandering around her mouth.

That's how she felt now, wanting to gargle and then put a compress with chamomile leave around her neck, to take a drink of brandy with honey, water with syrup and cinnamon, swallow a raw egg yolk, pray to *San Judas Tadeo*. She wanted to protect her voice. She knows the truth well. Her voice is the only thing she has to take her far away, on to better things.

But on the plane, la Martha didn't notice her nerves. She saw la Serena whispering, but she never would have thought that she was praying to *Santa Clara*, or to *la Virgen de la Caridad del Cobre*. She thought she was reviewing the boleros they had chosen for her *demo-show*. She gave thanks for the domestic picture they made, with her as the mother with her little quiceaño son, who looked like, but wasn't exactly, a little boy anymore; who, in the overly cared for nails, the highly arched brows, in the movement of his waist suggested something else. And she who was, but wasn't, a proud mother, a mature lady who hadn't let herself go in motherhood, who had been a young mother, a close confidant and the backbone of the family. La Martha Divine, a little bit too tall, a little bit too full of treasures and roundnesses that were out of place on her skin... But even so, someone could think, a little absently minded, that this lady and her child made up a family vacationing in the Dominican Republic. She looked at her son with care, touched his head and la Selena responded with the same smile as ever, distant and almost imperceptible, without halting the muttered mountain of words, of prayers and songs that beat against her consciousness.



Chapter 3

You, *María Piedra de Imán*, Our Lady of the Lodestone, enchantress and mineral who walked with the seven Samaritans, who gave you beauty and named you, you brought me the luck and fortune to sing, *Piedra Imán*. You were a stone idol, you will be my shelter, you will be with me. I ask you to make my voice come forth heavy, bristling with pain, let my voice sit on the breast of those who listen to me and leave them contorted in melancholy and applause. I ask you for gold as my treasure, silver for my house and for you, like beam of light from the *Santísima* Virgin Mary, to stand sentinel over my home and my being. I ask your protection as a safeguard...

For this, please make my house prosperous and happy and let the good star guide me and light my path. Give me you magical benefaction, lend me your talisman, so that I may have the power and dominion to defeat my enemies, please, *Piedra Imán*, guide me along the opposite path, the absolute opposite from when I walked the streets. To be able to sing was if nothing had ever happened to me, like when I was a little boy and had a house and a family. There was suffering, sometimes we had to eat cold Chef Boyardee and bread night after night. But we were happy. There was no need to corrupt yourself, to despair for yourself, to sing to survive. And now I don't want, *Piedra Imán*, to sing that way. I want to sing from a new mouth, as if I had just been born the moment the spotlight hits me. Free from memories.

In return for what you give me, I will give you a story of amber, a story of jet, granules of coral, oh deliver me from envy and from all that is evil. I will give you steel shavings so that all passes over me and enrichens my path, I will give you wheat to

vanquish my enemies, incense and myrrh as the extra token that the three wise men gave to beloved Jesus, and I will give you the three powers of virtue of *Piedra Imán*, first three creeds, second seven salves, third, five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys, praising the Lord on his holy day and saying Glory to God in the Highest and on Earth peace, goodwill toward men, blessed bread of Holy God that soothes my soul and cleanses me from my sin.

Forgive me my sins, holiest *Piedra Imán*; the sins of this faithful fag, the most manhandled *qinceaño* in the *barrio*. And not by uncles, or stepfathers, or neighbors in love with his cat-eyed gaze, but by people who came and went and didn't come back, by *hombrotos grandes*, brutes who, from far away, and who knows how, realized something that only I could sense. They came and opened their car door for me already knowing that I would get in, that I was going to stay there looking at them from the corner of my eye, that I was going to let my trembling hand move closer to where it moved, that it was going to go the same as always, with that bulge beneath their pants, that beautiful shock, wanting to cry, that burning itch of saliva, the tears in these eyes, wanting to die right there. They knew that I was going to let a mass of liquid run over the inside of the car, getting it wet, staining it with smells; the carpets and vinyls and even the steering wheel. Then came how the guy's face would harden, when he discovered, but didn't say, what he had discovered. They paid me twenty pesos, *Piedra Imán*, twenty pesos, crumpled and put in my sweaty pant pocket by their hand, as if it were the price of my secret, of what they wore twisted in their skin. The price of my sins and of my mercy.

But if I sinned, then they were the greatest sinners of all, they were the greatest enemies. I never saw those men again, enchantress *María Piedra de Imán*. In the

beginning I only saw them once. They disappeared later, as if swallowed by the earth. You who put them in my path, from my path take them away, you who the seven Samaritans gave beauty and named, to the one that kneels at your feet, call him by the name that you gave him, protect the voice that permits him to pray to you and ask you for your protection. And this same voice he gives unto you as his best offering if you will guide him and light his path. Blessed bastard, light my home. I give this to the *Piedra Imán*.



After arriving in the Dominican Republic, Sirena and la Martha settle into their hotel and arrange a time for Sirena's audition with the hotel manager, Contreras. During the audition, Contreras and his business acquaintance, Hugo Graubel are impressed with Sirena's captivating performance. While waiting for Contreras' offer the next day, Sirena decides to go to the beach. Here the narrator changes, introducing Leocadio, a young Dominican boy who is spending the day at the same beach as Sirena.



Chapter 8

“Leocadio, don't go too far out from the shore, *mijo*, the sea is a traitor and you don't know how to swim.” His mother had taken them to spend the day at the beach. At Bocachica. Leocadio can count on one hand the number of times that his mother had found the time to take him to the beach.

He'd had to spend last night alone. His mother told him that she had to go unexpectedly to Monte Cristi, to visit his *abuela*. Leocadio asked her if it was an emergency, if *la abuela* was dying. “*Muchacho*, weeds never die”, his mother had

replied, as she prepared for the trip. “I can’t explain what it’s about right now, it’s a surprise.” But before running out the door to the bus station, his *mamá* promised him that they would have a party when she got back.

Late in the afternoon of the next day, his mother returned with a little girl holding onto her hand. Leocadio walked slowly down the hill from the house. Then he ran as fast as he could when he recognized who was holding his mother’s hand. It was Yesenia, his younger sister. It had been a year since he had seen her. Leocadio and Yesenia didn’t sleep that night, they were talking so much. They shared the bed. It felt so good to have someone to laugh with, to provoke their mother’s late night scolding with, someone to help him escape from his eternal vigilance through squeals and jokes. It felt so good to not be so alone.

And now they were in Bocachica, *mamá*, Leocadio and Yesenia, who had now come for sure to live in the capital with them. This was the surprise that his mother had been keeping secret. His little sister had grown so much. She was now his height, maybe even taller than him, and two little hills of flesh were already starting to make themselves known underneath her blouse. Yesenia was his spitting image. She had the same olive skin and honey-colored, frizzy hair. But in her features there was also something hard, maybe in the jawline, or in the eyebrows, something that made Leocadio stare at her a long time as if it was he who should have her features and she his, as if the faces of the two siblings were on the wrong body. His mother had made a celebration feast that morning. White rice, a fricassee from pieces of goat that *la abuela* had given her as a gift in the countryside. At the market, she had bought meat stuffed *kipes*, bottles of soda and *dulces del país*. Leocadio saw how his mother prepared the dishes, covered them with

plantain leaves, to keep them warm, and then he watched her walk over to the corner where he and Yesenia were in to cover them with kisses. “Come on, *hijo mío*, before the beach fills up on us,” she said to them, as she got some T-shirts and shorts out of the trunk. “Then we’ll be stuck without any shade and I’m too dark already to get any more of tan on these bones,” joked his mother and then she opened her mouth to laugh with her perfect, white teeth. Teeth that announced a special happiness. Leocadio heard his mother laugh with her mouth open, like never before, and found it infectious. Yesenia also started to laugh, without really knowing why. So, with their bellies laughing from happiness, they all stepped outside to catch the bus for the Balneario de Bocachica.

They strolled along the edge of the water until they reached a shady spot to set up. From a big bag, his mother took out a sheet that she had folded carefully to take up less space. She hung the sheet between the branches of two cocoplum trees, to make a kind of colorful awning. The ground was twisted with roots and sand; on it, the three put down a big beach towel that his mother had “borrowed” from her bosses’ house. Then, Yesenia and Leocadio went running down to the water to swim in the cool sea. They were celebrating so many things. “The *patrona*’s daughter needs a girl and Yesenia is old enough to help. They’ll pay her like a woman, because I promised doña Imelda that since my daughter grew up in the country, she can do any kind of housework. The girl only lives two blocks away Leocadio, two blocks! So Yesenia can move to the capital! It’s a godsend, *mijo*, because I have to say, it was giving me horrible nightmares. On the one hand, you had to stay home alone so much of the time and then on the other, your sisters were living out in the country with *mamá* whose age is really starting to get to her. I just couldn’t keep living with that kind of uncertainty.” As she spoke, his mother was

running left and right looking for driftwood for a makeshift campfire. Only very rarely had Leocadio heard her speak with this kind of enthusiasm. “Just think, Leocadio, two paychecks. And who knows, maybe in a little bit I can convince the *patrona* to find work for you too. Then we would bring out Mileidi and we could all live together. *Ay Virgen Santisima*, everything is finally coming together. You’ll see, Leocadio it won’t be much longer for us, you’ll see.”

Leocadio collected kindling with his sister for the fire that his mother had insisted on stoking. “My children are not going to eat cold food today, dammit, so start...” his mother said to the fire, while Yesenia and he watched, covering their mouths to keep from laughing. Yesenia found a piece of cardboard and offered it to her mother, to fan the sticks that were already starting to spit smoke. Leocadio went to find leaves to put over the campfire and then left to walk down along the beach.

The water was almost cold. Leocadio walked along the shoreline with his legs halfway in the water. With the soles of his feet, he tried to catch a snail for his sister, to avoid half buried pieces of bottle glass, to feel little fish brush against him. Suddenly he sensed a heavy gaze on his back. It was a big, *colorado* man who watched him from a distance, sunken between the waves. Leocadio looked around. He was sure of it, this man was staring and smiling at him. Leocadio’s face grew dark. Even at the beach these men wouldn’t leave him be. He didn’t know how they found him, how they followed his every move, how they saw something in him that made them lick their lips and filled their sly eyes with mischievous desire.

He had to return to where his *mamá* was. She was the safeguard, the touchstone. If they saw him with her, they would leave him alone. He could go back to swimming in

peace. Leocadio held the guy's gaze, throwing back at him all the hatred in the world with every blink. He turned his face with contempt. It was then that he saw it.

There in the sand, a long and gaunt body soaked up the rays of the sun. It stood up slowly and walked leisurely to the edge of the water. A cat-eyed gaze winced in disgust as it navigated the trash that rolled in with the waves. That body lifted its legs to avoid plastic bottles and candy wrappers. With a tiny swimsuit, a t-shirt on top and ponytail that tied up the jet black hair, the creature came closer the sea to cool off from the heat and noise of a day at the beach in Bocachica.

Leocadio walked towards this apparition and watched it with an undisguisable curiosity. It was a teenage boy, a boy who looked like a girl, just like him, just like his sister, but with skin the color of light cinnamon, very dark hair, and plucked eyebrows. The boy shot him a look of hostile boredom. But then the boy gave him a smile. Leocadio smiled too. He even dared to wave timidly at him with his hand, as he crossed the beach in the direction of the flowered awning. There his mother was still waving a piece of cardboard, warming the feast that she had prepared to commemorate this afternoon.



Chapter 9

“Two thousand, two hundred pesos, first offer.” They’ve got to be crazy, thinks la Sirena as she converts it to dollars. “*Pues*, three thousand.” Maybe. “Four thousand, two hundred.” Okay, that’s more like it. Selena bites her succulent lip and maliciously accepts the invitation from a group of *bugarrones* at the Bocachica beach. Right now, nearby, a private show for a rich man, a *rico* from Juan Dolio, the same *rico* who had seen her in

the hotel Jaragua, in her *demo-show*. Three hundred and seventy five dollars for a one single show. Now things were starting to go her way.

That morning, he had gone to Bocachica beach by herself because (shithole of a country) the hotels in the capital bordered a seafront without a beach, in front of a pier full of cars, of beggars and hustlers, trying to get what they could out of the tourists. He wanted to relax a little by the sea. Martha stayed by the pool waiting for calls from the hotel manager. No confirmed offers yet. Sirena got dressed agitatedly, took a bus that went to Bocachica and there came the offer. Four thousand, two hundred for a solo show... He would tell Martha, leave a note at the hotel desk. Three-hundred and seventy-five dollars; his opportunity to go to New York to try his luck.

“Deal. Take me to the hotel to get my things.”

“Where are you from?”

“Puerto Rico.”

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen” lied the fifteen-year-old, as she moved her perfumed behind onto the passenger seat.

Hugo Graubel, the Third, in another car, waited for la Sirena’s responses remembering how he had seen her made up as the image of delirium in that hotel bar. Now, he didn’t know exactly how, he had recognized her as she relaxed her slender androgynous body on the dirty sand of Bocachica. The little kids of the capital had come, just like every Sunday, to the beach in busloads. Families with their giant pots of *gandules* celebrating birthdays, throwing beer bottles, paper and bags of trash into the water. La Sirena howled her disgust, her “why didn’t I just stay by the pool,” her disdain

of “ugh, these people really *are* pigs.” Seeing the pools of urine floating on the waves, Selena walked along the edge of the water. With her little shaved body, half-naked, in the tiniest of speedos, she looked like a *marimacha* teenage girl pretending to be a man on the beach, but giving herself away as a woman by her leaps and squeals as she confronted the trash.

Hugo Graubel, the Third, recognized her as Sirena Selena. He noticed her, malicious along the sand and remembered her dressed as a bolero singer, standing in the lounge of the Jaragua; singing as if her soul were going to come out of her mouth. He remembered her, fragile and omnipotent, blackhaired and in the sand, lit by the spotlights, alone, totally alone. He desired her then like that, so petite, such a street boy. He recognized her as the woman of his dreams. He gave immediate instructions to the chauffeur to park next to the sea to watch her; even with his wife there, who was looking at him from the car out of the corner of her eyes, complaining as she did about this beach that was so dirty and in such bad taste, so why on earth they always had to stop here when they went to their seaside properties for the weekend (she really didn't know).

He never knew for certain how he recognized her. As he looked at the scenery through the window, thoughts and crazy words hit against him that he couldn't let echo in silence.

“I will love you, Selena, like I have always wanted to love a woman, like I have always wanted to love a woman.”

It had been a while since something like this had happened to him; to Hugo Graubel, the third, who walked through life as though dead inside, bored of his life as a businessman, tired of a wife who no longer interested him in the least and trapped on this

island of stagnation. Commercial games with the government figures of the day didn't awaken his interest, neither did the shopping trips to Miami or New York, or the life squandered, or the rise and fall of his affairs in the international stock market. And now, precisely now, he had found la Sirena on the coast of his listlessness. How could he not try to catch her in his hands? How could he not search for the necessary strategies to bring himself closer to his prey, close enough to fill his mouth with her? Heedless of the irate gaze of his wife, who was yapping something about what the people would say if they saw his Mercedes parked by the public beach of Bocachica, he took out his cell phone. He had to make an important business call...

“Hotel Jaragua? Put señor Contreras on, please, this is Hugo Graubel. Yes, I'll wait...”

And while he waited on hold, he strung together in his memory the words with which he would ask a great favor of his friend, to postpone contracting la Selena, to give him time to make his move. He had to ensure that la Sirena would stay in his house, outside, in the pool house. He had to book her to perform a show, under the pretext of livening up a meeting of foreign investors, who by coincidence would be at his house. During which, he would be able to get closer to her, little by little, seducing her in a flood of attentions, granting her everything that she asks for with her enchanting mouth. Contreras, for his part, would have to distract the other one, she could stay at the hotel with all expenses paid, or go out shopping, or sightseeing in town while she waited for the offer that would be delayed because of unforeseen obstacles. “Tell her whatever you want, Contreras, that the cost of the show wasn't clear, that the hotel owner is on

vacation, that they're getting together the available dates, whatever it is..." That would give him the necessary opportunity to slowly approach the shadowy skin of his Sirena.

"Just what are you plotting now?" grumbled Solange, the wife, sitting as far from him as possible, next to the window on the back passenger side.

"Nothing. A surprise that I'm preparing for the investors who are visiting us."

"But didn't we decide that I was in charge of entertaining them? I booked the Hotel Talanquera pianist, and I arranged for the chef to prepare a special buffet."

"You don't have to cancel anything. My plans don't interfere with yours."

"And may I ask what exactly your plans are?"

"To book a singer, to perform two or three songs before dinner."

"That sounds fine. But you should have told me ahead of time."

"I just thought of it now."

"Now? Just now when we were parked by Bocachica?"

"I know, isn't it funny? The sea always inspires me."

And he let the conversation end there. He knew that Solange would scream her head off when she saw la Sirena, and so he was not going to have any more arguments than he had to appease his wife. He would cross that bridge when he came to it. For the moment, he had to concentrate on how to traverse the abyss that separated him from Sirena Selena, this being of fantasy who had awakened his long dead thirst. He didn't know for certain what it was he wanted from Selena, or for Selena or with Selena. But what he had no doubt about was that he wanted to have her close, by his side, whatever the cost.



Sirena leaves a note at the hotel for Martha and takes a car to Hugo Graubel's house. As Sirena prepares for the performance at Graubel's party, Martha keeps Sirena's disappearance hidden from Contreras, who himself is occupied with distracting Martha on Graubel's orders. As the story continues to unfold, it is dotted with flashbacks, primarily of Sirena's past. Chapter 20, however, is a flashback to one of Martha's shows at gay nightclub in Puerto Rico.



Chapter 20

Bienvenido, esteemed public, how are you all tonight? Are you all good, all fabulous, all too much? Now, I want to extend a welcome to you to my show, a welcome from me, and from the whole administration of discoteca Boccaccio, that den of sin for local locas and for the international set alike, for tourists and natives, for the undecided and the open-minded chicos, the dyke buchas, and biological women who like to sit and watch men necking ...pooor little things. I want to dedicate tonight's show to los indecisos; those who when they get asked: "Oye, but are you gay?" screw up their mouths in surprise, then get real cool and take a breath like they're about to say something profound and protest: "Pues fijate, y'know, I don't believe in those kind of classifications. So maybe I'm bisexual. You know, you have to thoroughly, amplimente, explore the body, passion, desire". Exploring the flesh, that's why they're here! They should come by my dressing room after the show for the Discovery Channel tour that I'm gonna to give 'em.

Anyway, that's who my show is for tonight; for all those who don't know yet that they're locas but with any suerte will start today. Who here is indeciso? Let's see, raise

your hands. Nobody. And the *closeteros*? Who here is still in the closet? Let's take a look, *chicas*, take a risk, after all mommy and daddy should be home right now watching TV or walking to the parking lot after church and nobody is going to go up to them with this juicy piece of gossip because they're already busy laughing about it themselves. And a pretty picture they'd make saying: "Ay mira, doña Margot, did you know that during la Martha Divine's show at Boccaccio's a few nights ago I saw your *hijo* raise his hand when she took attendance of all the *closeteros*. And la Martha was just divine during her stand up. She was gorgeous, with a silver bodysuit with long sleeves and this long curly wig that came halfway down her back. I don't know how that *cabrona* does all that choreography up high on those stilettos that are just so *too much* like the ones she was wearing the other night. They can't be from here. And I wasn't able to ask where they came from, but Joito told me that she had to have ordered them by catalogue from New York. With the swim flippers that that she-man *macha* has for feet! Doña Margot, I would worry if I were you, because when that boy of yours comes out of the closet, it's going to be a real scandal, with the delicious little ass he has...I'm putting my name down as the winner". You see what I'm saying? We may laugh, but we don't gossip, we're not *chotas*, not on your life. *No se preocupen*, your secrets are safe with us...

But who do we have here? Papito and his shaved pecs. Ouch! *¡Qué dolor!* And look, the stubble is already starting to grow back. Does it itch? The same thing happens to me when I shave my crotch, you know, so that my bulge doesn't slip out when I wear a bikini and do the splits for my *coreografía*. It's for the show, see, not because I have crabs or anything, it's for style. Let me make an announcement, for you and for the exclusive public here tonight: "Martha Divine does not have crabs, nor does she have

gonorrhoea, AIDS, or dandruff". One has to speak clearly, because the trussed-up *locas* who work here with me are so catty, so jealous, so *lengüeteras*, that it wouldn't surprise me at all if one of them were to go over my head to the landladies, with some made-up story like "*Mira loca... you haven't heard? Divine has crabs. I'm not getting in a hot, tiny dressing room with that bitch I won't even share a wig with la cabrona. What if I got them too? What am I going to say to my husband? That I'm whoring around at work? We're going through a bit of a rough patch right now for me to expose myself to something like this. But now you know, so let's see what you're able to do about it and once you figure something out let me know. Really, la Martha is already over, always telling the same sad jokes. And then me, who you...". Ay sí, little one, because let me tell you, we *locas* are traitors, that's why *la comunidad* is how it is, stealing each other's husbands, cheating each other out of work, giving each other AIDS, skinning each other alive. But I'm not like that. I'm as *suave* as a pussy cat. Mmmrrrrroooowwww...*

Where are you from? From Cataño? *Ay, señor*, what a backwater village for such a delightful *macho*. And you, are you straight or gay? An *indeciso*? Personally, I like *indecisos*. *Papito*, you know that I understand, I'm supportive. I even dedicated my show to you. And in Cataño are there many *indecisos*? Yes! Dulce, I'm renouncing my life of sin and glamour this minute and moving to Cataño to find a husband out of those beaters, to cook *chuletas frías* for them and to set up a salon there to support them. Don't you worry about me. I know what I'm doing. I'll come visit you every week, though of course the show will fall apart without me. But before committing to this municipal engagement I should ask one question; how do you get to Cataño from here? Did you take the ferry to get here? The ferry and then bus *número uno*, that's right. You found your way? You

have a car? What a success, a homo *motorizado*! Dulce, Amelia, I found a husband, girls. *Así que ya saben*, don't call me I'll call you... And wipe the coke off your noses, *chicas*, there's still a little left, no, honey, under your nose, that's it, now wave to the audience. *Muy bien...* Sorry there, gorgeous, I don't know if I can go back to Cataño with you, because see, these people don't know how to do anything without me, the whole business'll fall apart on them. We'll talk about it after the show. *¿Okay, papi?*

Pues sí, esteemed public. The next little song that I have for you is from la Diana Ross, and it's about impossible love, like mine and my new husband's, my husband from the city of Cataño. Just another *indeciso*, like many of you here tonight; but then who doesn't suffer from a moment or two of indecision in this life of ours?

◇ ◇ ◇

Despite the objections of Hugo Graubel's wife, the moment of Sirena's performance arrives during the Graubel dinner party.

◇ ◇ ◇

Chapter 37

Anointed with sky and sweat

Sirena,

descends from the zenith of her dream

step

by

step.

She leaves her mermaid tail by the sea

behind in the waves

foot wrapped in a gauze of faint light; foot, thick buckled heels, the silvery

cocoon from the beginning of her time. Nails painted pearly coral-mauve. One by one, the painted nails of the first foot, Adam's foot in heels, the foot of genesis and of dream.

Footstep. Dry ice climbs that perfection of flesh. Dry smoke. Footstep. The audience's sighs. Out of the guests' mouths escapes the astonishing foot, in saliva, in a dry word that wraps her ankles. The shaved legs, utterly slender, of a sylph risen from the water's depths. The slight angular knees, free of all childish trace that might betray her. Smooth, polished as though they never... as though in life a scarlet line may have cartographed their border, only ever kneeling to pray for that same smoothness. Dry smoke that tangles around her legs.

la Selena

descends

a

stair step

one

after

the

other

until the witnesses are left breathless, the dry air winding around her infinitely fine waist, fine enough to encircle tightly in a single arm, in a single swipe and la Sirena spitting fire from her eyes, dry flames of blue fire, shooting flames from the fragile waist of a desperate gazelle and dry and now her leap in those heels. Her swaying waist like a firespitting sea from the front and from behind, from behind her waist already bare, hurricanes, maelstroms... and the sea foam climbs her, silenced up until her small dove breast, her narrowest of breasts with two hollow swells there, tiny bosoms of syrupy *alimbar* sweetness, wax fruits, the most seamless imitation of peach, in totality and downy fuzz *de qinceañera*.

Flame at her finger, flame at the dry ice that is the smoke navigating up to the neckline of her white sequined dress, not too loud, the white of the little clay virgin, lost, of the little girl fallen but immaculate, of spectacular purity on a silver platter and only the thick wrists and the starved slenderness of a community center dancer, betray her.

Selena,

open as the moon of the poor

and yet more closed than an abyss

she is, oh yes, the gateway of all desires.

Halfway down the staircase she stops herself. The witnesses remember having heard a faraway piano in the echo of her step. They remember the piano and the time lost

since she first put forth the fiery white foot, on its marble platter, as in its mixed marinade—dry ice and painful memory. They remember a few starting notes to a *bolero* like an unstoppable cascade of philosopher's stones, they remember a hand that clutched their entrails and lower down, those fingers—whose?—squeezing them. And the astonished breathlessness pushes some memory forward, to the very place of breath and of ignited flesh smoking dry ice. Halfway down the staircase la Sirena stops,

still.

Then they remember the piano but their eyes remain on her face, done to perfection. Almost the line of her hand, embalmed with shades of precise perfume; almost the dust smoke clinging to her skin, settling in each shimmering pore, the touches of blush on each cheek, blurred only in her suspicion, the agile paintbrushes delineating fine lines around that round mouth like a carnivorous butterfly, lips consecrated to kissing and to the ballad. Rose-mauve pearled in shades of coral, parted like a resonant conch, the colors that perfect her nose, the slender nose without a single open pore, siren's compass. And the black eyes, deep black of a department store glass gemstone, with the same loneliness as rhinestone. Profoundly lost, they don't see except for the mirage of their own gaze. Broad forehead of escaped thought, beautifully colored mauve at the edges. And framing her face, several black curls fall on her shoulders, a handful. Others are drawn back high, daring to show a neck as murmuring and taut as the rest of her. Not a drop too strident... not a drop. Not a drop in her expression, like a doll frightened by her own beauty,

by her replica.

The witnesses remember having heard the sea tangled in some piano of vision. The women anxiously bring their hands to their breast and the desires that they once had at the edge of the sea revive. A desire that several among them banished long ago, that others fulfill in the dark, in the very beaches of the hotel Talanquera, far from their husbands, far from their own eyes so as not to confuse themselves with some flesh full of salt that once relished the shadowy audacity of someone who gave them pleasure and put in them the rumor of far off regions of touch. The men cannot stop clutching their bellies, the presence of this Sirena hurts them, the unveiling of this angel from beneath the garments of fire and dry ice, fire and dry ice. And he was the handsome son, the nubile little niece who one day sat on their laps in a skirt and made them tremble, made them run to the saddest bar, made them die wanting strident jukebox coins, made them beg for this malevolent burning to leave their flesh in peace. They remember how they escaped, years running wild through the street and the brothel on calle Duarte. And all for what? To fall into Sirena's trap.

She doubles the disguise of her desire

(and they whisper low under their breath: *Te amaré...*)

Now she opens her mouth. Now with parted lips she swallows all the air in the room. Now a shadow draws over the calla lilies and they wilt, nearly shriveled before the ravenous breast of la Selena. Now her moon draws close to the balcony, open. The Apocalypse will happen. La Sirena, stopped, still, halfway down the staircase, sings *Invasión de ternura tus pasos y encendiéronse sueños pasados. Presiento en esos pasos la inquietud de buscar otros pasos que marchen con el mismo compás...*

But all is meticulous, all. The audience anchored in her incertitude, in her double damnation throughout time. Not a single heart beats, not a single drop of sweat on skin. Not a single cell splits while Sirena sings. Time obeys her voice; her voice was the only evidence that life continued. Her throat finely marks

tuyo...

and then

(footstep) *qué sutil magia tienen tus pasos* (footstep) *me dejaron un halo en su rastro*

(footstep) *aún yo siento en mi rostro tus manos* (footstep) *y siento en las mías* (footstep).

The air, the air escaped. A banker's wife felt lifted towards the eternal, and grabbed at her husband's arm; she wanted to whisper for him to not let her leave like this, flying over the heads of such distinguished guests, over the curly black mane of this adolescent *travesti*... the pure embodiment of the impossible.

(footstep)

(footstep)

But she couldn't whisper anything. Time hung on Sirena's chest searching for the ending note of her ballade. And now with lips parted, now mad with her own incarnation, she gives herself entirely

mis labios...

There was a quarter of the staircase left, disemboweled memories flood the whole foyer of the Juan Dolio house. The audience was left exhausted trying to throw themselves onto a life preserver of thunderous applause, thunderous to dispel that illusion. La Sirena lowered her gaze without smiling. She leaned slightly forward with her arms crossing her chest. She had just descended the staircase diagonally, towards the

table with the calla lilies. She took one, took the cut crystal glass full of brandy that she had left next to the vase. Glass in hand, she went towards the piano. On it, she laid down like a ship about to capsize.

Es mi corazón

una nave en el turbulento mar

desafiando la fuerte tempestad

de eso que llaman amor...

◇ ◇ ◇

As Sirena and Graubel arranged previously, Sirena leaves for the hotel where Graubel will join her after her performance, intending to get as much money as possible out of Graubel's infatuation with him. During the few days they spend at the hotel together, Sirena is unsettled to briefly lose her ability to sing while servicing a client, which he developed as a survival technique during her time on the streets.

Simultaneously, Leocadio's storyline unfolds. His mother, increasingly hard on her luck and concern about her son's safety, leaves Leocadio in the hands of doña Adelina, a woman who takes street-children into her house. There, an older boy at the house, Migueles, befriends Leocadio and speaks to him about the responsibilities of manhood for the first time in Leocadio's life. Migueles eventually finds Leocadio a job as a dishwasher at hotel Colón, at hotel that caters to the gay tourist trade and where Migueles waits tables.

◇ ◇ ◇

Chapter 46

In doña Adelina's house, a new custom had established itself. The other *muchachos* would crowd around Leocadio during dinner to ask him what his day was like. Narrating the events of the hotel, Leocadio better understood what he had talked about with Migueles the night that they had sat and smoked on the staircase. About making a man of oneself and taking life head-on alone. He realized that little by little he was earning the respect of the others. His new status as salary earning man had won him the friendship of the other pupils and now he could even share small luxuries, like seeing a movie or going out to buy ice cream and walk along the pier with his new friends. Having money in your pocket makes people treat you differently.

Sometimes days went by where Leocadio didn't see Migueles, even though now they worked in the same place. Because they belonged to different clans, Leocadio almost always had to stay in the service areas, while Migueles was in and out of the most public parts of the hotel. Migueles started work after midday, and got off late at night, when Leocadio had already gone home and went to bed. Even though he saw him less, Leocadio still felt a special camaraderie with his friend. His aplomb astonished Leocadio, and sometimes he felt a tickling in his stomach, when he saw Migueles with his waiter's uniform giving out precise orders on what had to be sent to the tables. Even though he arrived home dead tired, Leocadio tried to wait up for Migueles, like before, and to listen to the stories he told about the hotel and its guests. And so, however he could, he nurtured this special connection that brought him closer to his mentor.

There were days where Migueles found a way to meet Leocadio during the work day. Together they went up to the hotel roof, and from there they looked out over the city.

They relaxed for a moment looking out at its trees, its hidden squares. Migueles smoked a cigarette and told his little brother about the bad parts of his day, the times the manager, who Migueles was fed up with, corrected him about how to serve a table, or for not paying attention to the silverware's shine. Other times he celebrated the size of tip or the gifts that he had gotten that week with Leocadio. Leocadio insisted that he describe the bar again and again.

“You're still curious after Stan scared you when he caught you snooping around?”

“Tell me, Migueles, come on, don't be like that...”

“But, León, it's just a normal bar.”

“Oh, come on! You can see that it's different from miles away.”

“Hold on, how do you know that if you've never even been up there once? You snuck in and looked, didn't you? I swear, if the boss catches you, Leocadio, you'll be seeing stars and then I'll be in deep shit thanks to you. Look, I already promise you...”

“I haven't even peeked, okay? But you can tell it's different from the music. They don't play *bachatas* or *merengue* or anything like that. It's straight American music that you can hear all the way downstairs.”

“Well, yeah okay there's that.”

“So it must be different. Migueles, tell me, what's it like? What are the lights like, how does it look?”

“I already told you, *hermanito*, that it's like any other bar. Plus I'm not good at describing decorations and things. You know what—why don't we wait until the coast is clear one of these days and then I'll take you up to the bar without anyone knowing. Then you can see it for your own eyes, and won't wonder about it anymore.”

He tried to calm himself down after Migueles' promise. But Leocadio suspected that, if he didn't keep asking, months would go by before he would be able to see the bar. Many Friday afternoons Leocadio hung around the hotel lobby, near the stairway, bewildered by the bustle, the music and the coming and going of tourists. He always kept an eye for the boss or the manager. He didn't want to lose his job, or to give Migueles a hard time. But he had to see the bar. Whenever he could, he reminded his friend "about the bar." Migueles, fed up, grumbled to Leocadio "Take it easy, if I knew you were going to be like this, I wouldn't have promised you anything." The two of them laughed after Migueles had scolded him, once Leocadio looked at him, timid and determined, and coaxed a smile out of his friend's big grey eyes. Even so, Migueles stayed firm in his reluctance. "*Hermano*, stop bothering me about this bar thing. I already told you that I'll take you up there in secret, but that'll be when I have time to, not when you feel like it." There was nothing else to do. He would have to wait. Or venture in himself.

He even got mad at Migueles. He didn't want to listen to his stories any more. And Migueles stopped talking. He didn't even ask Leocadio what had happened. He looked at him for a long moment, while Leocadio avoided his gaze and felt his face grow hot. He couldn't look at Migueles. He knew that if he raised his eyes, they would ruin everything for him. One beautiful day, his friend interrupted him on his way to the dishwashing room.

"Come on, let's go" he said

"Where?" asked Leocadio, without getting a response since Migueles was already opening the door to the back staircase that lead to the bar.

Everything was dark when the two of them arrived. Leocadio stretched out his hands, looking for Migueles, because he couldn't see him. In that moment he heard the soft click of the light switch and saw how the colored lightbulbs lit up, the little white lights on the ceiling, and the spotlights on the dancefloor with its mock crystal ball. The walls were all covered in murals, and with glass that reflected Leocadio's image, and that of Migueles, handsome in his waiter's uniform. Leocadio traced his shoes over the floors' carpet; traced his fingertip along the line of the bar; broke away underneath the swinging door and to play bartender with Migueles who, in turn, asked him for a *copita de Brugal*. He took the glass of rum as a shot and looked around to make sure that nobody had seen. Leocadio laughed.

“Who are you afraid of? The only person here who could go to the manager is me. Or a partying phantom, trapped here, paying for his sins.”

“A femme, *medio pájaro*, party phantom that died on vacation at the Hotel Colón.”

“After dancing a *disco-merengue*.”

“With Stan, who shocked him dead, when he told him that he was Dominican.”

“Hey, Migueles, do men really dance together here and nobody cares?”

“Why would anyone care, if they're all doing the same thing?”

“How does that stuff work?”

“What stuff?”

“Dancing.”

“Like this...” Migueles took Leocadio by the hand, wrapped his other arm around his waist and pulled Leocadio up against himself as he smiled. At first, Leocadio felt uncomfortable in his friend’s arms. But he knew that if Migueles noticed then he would end the visit to the bar. To hide his embarrassment, Leocadio acted like a shy *señorita*, batted his lashes and danced with Migueles on the dancefloor filled with brightness and twinkling lights that ignited and extinguished. Then he got a little distracted, watching the reflection of the lights in the crystals on the walls. The whole floor was covered with dancing fireflies that enveloped the pair of them. Migueles continued dancing to an intimate beat. Leocadio tried to take in everything with his eyes. The sound system remained off, but he could have sworn that he heard music. Foreign dancing music, the kind that could sometimes be heard below in the lobby. Migueles led the steps, and Leocadio focused on learning the beat that led the dance. He looked at his friend, eyes brimming with happiness.

“Like this: with one leading and the other following.”

“Just like this.”

“The taller one leading the smaller.”

“Not always. Sometimes the taller guy isn’t the man of the couple.”

“What do you mean he isn’t the man?”

“The man is the one who leads, who decides. The other is the woman.”

Leocadio stopped speaking for a moment. He continued watching the lights, but he seemed to be concentrating on the words that Migueles had just said.



Chapter 47

Selena steals light like a thief. Sirena steals the very eyes of those who adore her. She wants everything they have. She deserves to reach the top. She deserves a better life than the one she has. That is what her voice declares the nights that she sings. That's what her voice declares, her voice that intoxicates all those around her. Each time that she sings, her voice is a hunger, a tumor of hunger, a damnation.

And she can't explain why audiences pay to see her suffering; now that she's losing the easy grace that before was a perfect simulacrum. At the heart of it is Hugo, wrapped in luxury, watching her, as she dies from pain in front of her patron.

Could it be that the audience can only truly feel what pain is through people like Sirena Selena? It scares her to die in front of so many witnesses; in truth it scares her to live so closely to what pain is...

The show ends late at night. Hugo waits patiently while Selena's admirers speak to him, congratulate her and draw close to him to see if what they saw was really true. Several of them discover what Hugo knows. It's a *muchachito* who sang to them tonight, a young man acting as a woman. Others don't see anything and congratulate her before leaving to sleep in their beds, peaceful, with the same lives as always. Sirena arrives swaying where Hugo waits for her, leaning on the bar.

"Let's eat something here," she suggests

"Not tonight. I made a special request for them to bring it to your room."

"Okay." Sirena keeps her silence, a silence that could mean so many things...

They go up to the Talanquera suite and sit down to eat Lobster Thermidor. Sirena has never had lobster before. She is content sucking on the legs, cracking the shell and slurping the melted butter covering her hands. Hugo watches her without wanting her to speak, because he suspects that her voice would break the spell and transform her back into a character.

They finish eating. They have a cognac and talk. Hugo waits for there to be silence. That is the signal for the other ritual to begin. Hugo kneels again in front of la Sirena. Sirena feels a summersault in her chest. She begins to croon.

“Don’t sing tonight. I feel so alone.”

The nymph stops. On the outside, the mouth swallows its song, but from within it tries to murmur a melody of love. “Holy God” —a thought mid-melody— “don’t let my libretto fail me now. Holy virgin” —a frightened plea— “let this man keep going where he’s going.” But there’s the feeling that Hugo is on the brink of something else. He already has him in his mouth and kisses him with such voluptuousness. He caresses his behind and holds his pelvis to control the rhythm. He lifts him from the sofa and kisses him softly between his two small breasts. Now he bites his ears, next embraces him passionately. Then he throws him onto the bed, undresses him completely and lays down at his side. Hugo draws Sirena’s hand towards his pants so that he can feel it. In this movement he makes her realize the state that she has already put him in.

“Look what you do to me, *sirenito*...”

And he says *sirenito*. Hugo calls him by the masculine name as he has never done before and interrupts her song. He makes Sirena open her eyes and forget her performance.

“*Ay my sirenito*, look, look...”

Now it is Hugo who is ready to receive him with all his desires on display. His penis surges from his pants like a shark out of water. Sirena intuits the coming devouring. She touches him. Hugo is lost in an ecstasy of touch. He doesn't even hear when Sirena, recovered, opens her throat. He thinks that it is another rumble of the sea. His breathing grows agitated while Sirena, calmly, continuously sings and caresses him with her fake-nailed, her saliva-covered hand. Sirena touches him from behind at the same time with a wet finger, sinks in the finger until it scrapes him from within. Hugo likes the pain. He lets himself be touched, he would let himself be killed by this little boy, to see if that is the way to prove Hugo's commitment, to see if one day he can convince him to let Hugo into the corner where he's hiding, scared to death.

“I am going to love you, Selena, like I have always wanted to love...” and then then he can't breathe. He falls headfirst on the pillow. His *sirenito* scrapes him again. Hugo imagines him inflamed and watching Hugo with tenderness. Hugo can sense him moving his lips and thinks that perhaps his *sirenito* is telling him that he loves him, that he has never felt so close to anyone. Hugo tries to tell him that he feels like another version of himself, as if each of them were waiting on the other side of an ancient mirror.

“Call me *sirenito*, call me *sirenito*,” repeats la Sirena while scraping her host's rosiest flesh with a fingernail. Sirena watches him writhe face-down on the pillow and for a moment softens. Hugo's obedient pain offering up his surrender is a pact that mollifies Sirena's rage. Sirena contemplates his wide back, and the limp arms that curled up around him so many times. Sirena would like to tell those arms so many things... But to speak she would have to undo who she really is, undo the person who she has worked so

hard to become. And if she throws herself forward and doesn't come back? Then who would she be?

Hugo notices when a little bit of lukewarm saliva falls between his butt cheeks and then smiles at the sensation of pressure covering him, as a slender body climbs on top of him and locates that mysterious point, that rosy puckered mouth. Hugo twists, he grows drowsy from the heat the brushing touch and then knows nothing more than to support himself with the bed sheets as his *sirenito* rides him slowly, then more and more quickly. Hugo allows himself to be transported by a whisper of flesh, by a cold current, as if he were at the bottom of something very blue and very deep. Outside the sea howls.

The next day, Hugo Graubel wakes up, well rested. He reaches out in the bed for the body of Sirena. He doesn't find it. Maybe Sirena is in the bathroom. He gets up. He goes to check the time. He can't find his Cartier watch either. He finds his pants, which had his wallet in the pocket. He can't find that either. He goes to the wardrobe. From the inside swing empty clothes hangers, the shoes boxes that he bought Sirena are open and empty too. Hugo gets dressed as well as he can and goes down to hotel reception. He asks to speak with the manger. He asks about Sirena.

“This morning I saw her take a taxi and tell the driver to take her to the capital. She had a big bag and a vanity case. She left saying that you would settle the account. She left the room keys here.”

“And she didn't leave anything for me, not even a note?”

“Not that I know of, señor Graubel.”

“Nothing?”

“No, señor, nothing.”



Chapter 48

He the bigger, she the smaller. One a man, the other a woman, although he can be the smaller one, it isn't necessarily the strongest or the biggest who's a man more than the other, it's the one who directs, who decides, who's in charge. There are many ways of being in charge, many ways of being man or woman, she decides. Sometimes you can be both without having to decide to be one or the other. Money, the nice car, the dough to take you places, to go into the most beautiful, brilliantly lit bars. All this falls to the man. And if the two dance and the other leads, then you know that you're the woman. And if she decides where to go, then she becomes the man, but if he stays in Migueles' arms, who leads, then he is a woman. And if it were her who convinces him to dance, who draws him in with her burning face and her wiles? Then, who is the man or the woman? And if I were the one who steered him forward and back, who knew where the light switch was and turned it on so that starlings of light appeared vibrating against the walls? And if a tourist took Migueles by the waist and led him, and invited him for a joyride in his nice sports car to the beach and it was he who had the money? Then which one is the man? Migueles speaks with confidence and stands up to the bosses, gets work. He is a man. The bigger, the smaller, the stronger, the braver, the cleverer. And if the smartest is not the strongest, and if the one who leads doesn't have the money, but rather one earns the money because he is the smartest? And if I am here with this music, and there are Migueles' arms, which are strong and tender tree branches? And if this little feeling is strong, is big, is smart, is tough? A resemblance of what a man should be, a dance between one bigger and the other smaller, but with one who will be smart and strong.

Migueles is a man and that's that. Sometimes he follows and obeys, sometimes not. When he goes upstairs, for example. When he comes to dance, not to wait tables, to dance, to sit at tables with tourists and dance with them.

If they want to be the ones who lead, then they should do it. If they want to be the ones who curl up against his chest, then do it. But they better not play games, trap him, frightened in a corner, startled, Leocadio calling out for his mother and eyes watching him with a fiendish gaze. Not here, here they dance and the white lights distract and astonish the fiend. And me in his arms and in the lights, I shine, I am the clever one, not the coward, the bigger, not the little one, the one who has money. And Migueles is my brother who teaches me how to dance, and treats me like a man, but dances with me even though I am small and delicate. He respects me and dances with me. I am respected and when I grow, I will carry myself with more respect and will come to dance here, where there are no fiends.

Rendering a Responsible Translation of *Sirena Selena, vestida de pena*

I. A Theoretical Framework for Translating Unspoken Rhetoric

Of all the theoretical voices that contributed to this translation project, the book with the most direct relationship to *Sirena Selena, vestida de pena* is Mayra Santos-Febres' own work, a collection of critical essays, *Sobre Piel y Papel*. Santos-Febres' articulation of the concepts she enacts in *Sirena Selena* had an enormous impact on my own analysis of the novel, and also provides a lens through which to consider the guiding principles I used during this translation project. In the Chapter "Los usos del eros en el Caribe," Santos-Febres lays out a powerful means of viewing literary representations of the body and the impact of those representations on discourse: "Las 'retóricas del cuerpo' funcionan entonces como dinámicas de reformulación simbólica. El cuerpo como productor de signos bordea la frontera que el lenguaje traza entre lo pronunciable y lo impronunciable" (89).¹ It is important to note that Santos-Febres identifies the "rhetorics of the body" at work specifically in the Caribbean literary corpus, although its implications extend outside of that geographic realm. In this way, Santos-Febres uses "the body" as a key theoretical concept and a site of cultural inscription as have other theorists interested in gender, but simultaneously locates it specifically in the Caribbean's colonial history of physical exploitation. In a space where the body is both the embodiment of self and an exploited commodity, Santos-Febres presents the body as an

¹ Note: all translations are mine.

The 'rhetorics of the body' function therefore as dynamics of symbolic reformulation. The body as a producer of signs borders the boundary that language draws between the pronounceable and the unpronounceable.

entity with the ability to disrupt existing symbolic systems. As a result, Santos-Febres locates the marginal nature of literary representations of the body in between what can be said and what cannot be expressed by language (and certainly not by a dominant discourse), just as her protagonist embodies the space between man and woman, adult and child, love and pain. Indeed, Sirena Selena's swaying waist, cat-eyed gaze, and long, shaved legs all speak to the body as a place of self-expression, exploitation, and survival. As Sirena's body fills each page of the novel with all these unsaid experiences, the translator must face the challenge of rendering into a target language a rhetoric that already borders the unpronounceable in the source language.

Taking this challenge as a point of departure, I apply Gayatri Spivak's discussion of the relationship between rhetoric and logic in her article "The Politics of Translation," as a theoretical framework. I use Spivak's view of rhetoric as an unspoken component of the text, and a critical means of survival and expression, to bring Santos-Febres' "rhetoric of the body" from the original novel to my translation of *Sirena Selena*. In Spivak's words,

Logic allows us to jump from word to word by means of clearly indicated connections. Rhetoric must work in the silence between and around words in order to see what works and how much. The jagged relationship between rhetoric and logic, condition and effect of knowing, is a relationship by which a world is made for the agent, so that the agent can act in an ethical way, a political way, a day-to-day way; so that the agent can be alive, in a human way, in the world. (399)

Both Spivak and Santos-Febres use the concept of rhetoric in relation to the unsaid means of expressions that allow for survival in a highly political context. Where Santos-Febres' "rhetorics of the body" trace out the liminal space between pronounceable and unpronounceable, to Spivak rhetoric is in itself an unspoken but integral component of the text, part of a three-tiered system of rhetoric, logic, and silence. This ambiguous, playful feature of language allows the translator to integrate the expressive elements of a text into a similarly rhetorical translation. By drawing attention to the points where language's meaning begins to fray, the translator can embrace the "disruptive rhetoricity" (398) that exists in between the logical progression of each word.

Rhetoric is an especially vital means of expression in works by the female authors from developing countries on which Spivak writes, and an element of text frequently erased by careless translation unable to understand and surrender to the text. Spivak uses "the unrelenting mockery of self and Kālī" in Ram Proshad Sen's song as an example of rhetoric in Bengali poetry, and contrasts it with the loss of that same rhetoric in one French translation, which she considers "marred by the pervasive orientalism ready at hand as a discursive system" (402). Much like the subtle rhetoric Spivak identifies in the Bengali poem, Santos-Febres's rhetorics of the body balance Sirena along the gender binary, along the beginning of adulthood, and along every border that defines the self. These rhetorics disrupt traditional use of language in the changes in binary gender pronouns, the crossing of national and cultural boundaries via code switching, and the lyric descriptions of Sirena as both mythic and human. Because Santos-Febres' "rhetorics of the body" demonstrate a similar "disruptive rhetoricity" that Spivak considers key to

her method of responsible translation, I employ Spivak's theoretical framework as an answer to the challenges that Santos-Febres' text proposes.

In choosing Spivak's work as a theoretical grounding, my translation both draws from and rejects elements of the long-established debate on ethical translation in the field of Translation Studies. In order to contextualize her work, I turn to Lawrence Venuti's work in *The Scandals of Translation*, which centers on the translator's role in upholding or disrupting oppressive dominant discourses. Within the discussion of the merits of a domesticating translation, which is easily accessible in the target culture, versus a foreignizing translation, which retains more of the source culture and language, Lawrence Venuti posits that all translation is inherently domesticating. However, in his view, an ethical translation should attempt to incorporate foreignizing elements as much as possible within that domesticating practice. As Venuti states in *The Scandals of Translation*,

Translations, in other words, inevitably perform a work of domestication. Those that work best, the most powerful in recreating cultural values and the most responsible in accounting for that power, usually engage readers in domestic terms that have been defamiliarized to some extent, made fascinating by a revisionary encounter with a foreign text. (5)

This practice not only results in translations with more specific elements of the source text, but also has the power to effect social and cultural change within the discourse of the target language. For Venuti, the idea of ethical translation practice is based on the political implication of translating cultural and linguistic difference.

In so far as Spivak is concerned with treating translated texts with greater respect for difference, she shares Venuti's definitions of ethical translation. However, Spivak alters this definition of an ethical translation by raising the question of agency. She proposes a practice of translation that surrenders to the differences and individual demands of the source text, where the translator gives up as much of her own agency as possible. This emphasis on difference is based on a critique of the universalizing treatment that writers from the developing world often receive at the hands of Western feminist scholars and translators. As Spivak states,

The presupposition that women have a natural or narrative-historical solidarity, that there is something in a woman or an undifferentiated woman's story that speaks to another woman without benefit of language-learning, might stand against the translator's task of surrender.

Paradoxically, it is not possible for us as ethical agents to imagine otherness or alterity maximally. We have to turn the other into something like the self in order to be ethical. To surrender in translation is more erotic than ethical. In that situation the good-willing attitude 'she is just like me' is not very helpful. (400)

By emphasizing the translator's total surrender to the demands of the text, Spivak here underlines the dangers of over-empathizing with the contents of the text. Instead, she advocates for a deep personal understanding of the source text that acknowledges "the fact that translation is the most intimate act of reading. Unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, she cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text" (400). This process eschews the ethical approach of

universalizing empathy; in other words, it refuses to render the other into the familiar in order to humanize it. Instead Spivak advocates for a representation of difference attainable only by giving agency to the text itself. In order to differentiate this process from its ethical predecessor, for the continuation of this paper, I refer to my translation strategy as responsible translation rather than ethical translation.

One obstacle to my responsible translation is Spivak's very specific criterion for a translator's qualifications. She states that in order "To decide whether you are prepared enough to start translating, then, it might help if you have graduated into speaking, by choice or preference, of intimate matters in the language of the original" (404). Although I love this book as a reader, I approach it as an outsider. Not ever having spoken the Spanish of the Caribbean or of Puerto Rico's queer community, I turned to the next best thing—the knowledge of Caribbean Studies and Queer Studies scholars. In this way, Spivak's erotics of difference, and their influence on my translation strategy, point to my goal in this project: to create a responsible translation of *Sirena Selena, vestida de pena* with respect to the insights made possible by an integration of Queer Studies, Caribbean Studies, and Translation Theory.

In order to highlight the intersections of these various theoretical influences on my work, I will first briefly address the process of selecting this text and the implications of this selection in regards to the fields of both Feminist and Gender Studies and Postcolonial Studies. I will then include a brief section on my translation's place within two of the dominant conversations in Caribbean studies and discuss the techniques I use to retain the text's regional grounding without exoticizing its contents to U.S. audiences. Finally, I will discuss my translation of foreign queer culture by comparing it in the work

of theorists who similarly grapple with the implications of postcolonial queer culture in translation.

II. Contextualizing the Text

Before I turn my attention to the influences that each of these intersecting fields have brought to bear on my translation, let me first discuss the implications of selecting this text. As Venuti notes, the selection of translated texts carries great implications in the formation of cultural identities. He states, “Translation wields enormous power in constructing representations of foreign cultures. The selection of foreign texts and the development of translation strategies can establish peculiarly domestic canons for foreign literatures” (67). While some English-language Caribbean literature is widely read in the United States, by far the most prevalent cultural representations of the Caribbean in the U.S. are advertisements and films by North American creators. These works draw from established tropes of the exotic and the hyper-sexual, emphasizing the body over the mind. In addition, the exploitation of transgender women across all forms of media in the U.S. contributes to the very real danger of reducing Sirena and her supporting characters to set of established sexualized tropes.

With this cultural landscape in mind, I selected *Sirena Selena, vestida de pena* both because of my love for the text as a reader and because I believe its nuanced portrayal of Sirena as a non-binary, impoverished, and Afro-Caribbean—but not as other—would, in Venuti’s words, be “a text that is a source of potential cultural change” (87). With my translation of *Sirena Selena*, I aim to bring a Puerto Rican novel written about and for those outside of the mainstream North American experience to U.S. readership.

There are scholars who disagree, however, with this view of *Sirena Selena* as a positive portrayal of transsexuality in the Caribbean literary canon. In *Island Bodies*, Rosamond King critiques *Sirena Selena* as a perpetuation of harmful tropes about transgender characters in the Caribbean canon. King explains the detrimental pattern of transgender characters as a source of deliverance: “In Caribbean literature, trans characters are also typically portrayed as tortured but benevolent angels. . . . However, as I will detail below, the deliverance is backhanded because Caribbean trans characters are also consistently kept on the margins of the text and re deprived of their individuality (25).” For King, *Sirena Selena* falls into this pattern because it “swings between portraying trans characters—here the main characters—as individuals struggling to live the lives they want and as stereotypically mythical beings who deliver others by revealing their deepest desires” (33). While King’s critique is grounded in analysis of well-established patterns in the Caribbean literary canon, her argument that Sirena, Martha and other non-binary characters are “kept on the margins” uses Lytle’s translation uncritically. King’s analysis of Lytle’s translation incorporates his domesticating tendency to understate points of difference, especially in regards to gender, nationalism, age, and religion. It is my hope that my translation, based in Spivak’s “erotics of difference,” will better capture this novel’s ability to address colonialism and colonial relationships, imperialism, racism, sexuality, gender, age, and interpersonal relationships, all located in the bodies of a few central characters. Indeed, it is *Sirena Selena*’s deft handling of each of these disparate and pressing concerns, in addition to its literary qualities, that ultimately convince me of the importance of bringing a new translation of this text to a larger audience in the United States. The challenge of translating these

elements will guide the continuation of this discussion, from post-colonialism and imperialism, to gender and sexuality.

III. A Colonizing Translation of a Postcolonial Novel?

In order to locate my work within the larger context of Caribbean Studies, I will first consider Mayra Santos-Febres' own description of *Sirena Selena* as an analogy for the post-colonial Caribbean experience. Santos-Febres lays out her explicit treatment of the Caribbean space in *Sirena Selena* in her chapter "Caribe y Travestismo." She explains that two images inspired the character of Sirena, adding that,

De ellas [las imágenes] nació Sirena, mi travesti. Ambas encarnan el Caribe; su dolor vestido de espectáculo, su miseria vestida de glamour, su grito hecho canción y seducción. A través de este travesti adolescente encontré mi manera de representar al Caribe; ese que viste su pena y su miseria de fantasía y exotismo para poder nombrarla, cantarla en boleros, llorarla en escena. Para develar la complejidad de las islas caribeñas, debía encontrar cómo nombrarlas desde el doble eje de la seducción y la pena . . . En este eje se funda su más fabulosa estrategia de supervivencia.² (121-122)

² From them [the images] Sirena, my *travesti*, was born. Both embody the Caribbean; their pain dressed as a performance, their misery dressed as glamour, their cry made song and seduction. Through this teenage *travesti* I found my way of representing the Caribbean; which dresses its pain and its misery in fantasy and exoticism in order to name it, to sing it in *boleros*, to cry for it on stage. To unveil the complexity of the Caribbean islands, I have to find a way to name them from the double axis of seduction and pain , . . . Founded in this axis is its most fabulous strategy of survival.

Santos-Febres makes clear here that *Sirena* is not only a story of individual survival through expression, but also a narrative about the pain and power of the postcolonial Caribbean experience. The survival strategy of seduction and pain that she employs to represent this larger regional experience is also a form of rhetoric—a rhetoric of the *bolero* as well as of the body. To better understand the “pena y miseria” that Santos-Febres captures as a phenomenon specific to the Caribbean context, let us turn to Stuart Hall, one of the most prominent Caribbean Studies theorists, whose work expresses a similar interest in Caribbean forms of expression as a strategy for survival. In his seminal piece “Negotiating Caribbean Identities,” Hall describes the Caribbean’s colonial legacy as the force that made the Caribbean “the first, the original and the purest diaspora” (6). In the face of the diasporic scars that the colonial displacement inflicted on the region, Hall asserts that the expression of these diverse influences is a form of survival and resilience, saying that,

I remain profoundly convinced that their [Caribbean peoples’] identities for the twenty-first century do not lie in taking old identities literally, but in using the enormously rich and complex cultural heritages to which history has made them heir, as the different musics out of which a Caribbean sound might one day be produced (14).

Both Hall and Santos-Febres take the pain inflicted by the Caribbean’s colonial legacy and find a musical means of expression in its complexity. Just as Hall calls for a wordless rhetoric, a “Caribbean sound,” rather than a “Caribbean song,” Santos-Febres also turns to musical and embodied rhetoric to express survival of colonial legacy.

As a result, I believe that by creating a translation of *Sirena Selena* that is driven by an understanding of the Caribbean's diasporic history, I can bring its method of survival through expression to a larger, English-speaking audience. Precisely because my intended audience is English-speaking, however, my project renders this subversive post-colonial narrative back into Puerto Rico's colonizing language. Just a brief consideration of Franz Fanon's 1952 discussion of language in *Black Skin, White Masks*, highlights how the idea of the colonizing language and its oppressive impact on the colonized culture is a foundational dynamic in Caribbean Studies for considering colonial power relationships.

Fanon underlines the direct relationship between language and access to power early on in the book, where he states that "Mastery of language affords remarkable power" (18). In the context of a colonial relationship, Fanon outlines the desire and necessity imposed on a colonized culture to assimilate to the colonizing language in order to gain access to power:

Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of local cultural originality—finds itself face to face with the language of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards (18).

Fanon makes it clear that, for him, a colonized person's choice to express herself is no choice at all, but rather it is a means of accessing power, a means that is simultaneously mandated and restricted by the colonizer. Moreover, the assimilation of the colonizing language goes hand in hand with the "death and burial" of local language, culture, and

expression. In a context where the language in which an author produces a literary work is a powerful political statement, it may be that my translation of *Sirena Selena* into the colonizing language of English is an inherently imperial act.

In order to create a responsible translation of this novel with both Hall and Fanon's work in mind, I try to translate the text into the colonizing language, while still retaining its specifically Caribbean linguistic and cultural nuances, and to do all this without exoticizing the foreignized elements. In searching for solutions to this challenge, Puerto Rican essayist Manuel Ramos Otero helps to locate the discussion within a specifically Puerto Rican context, with his article "De la colonización a la culonización." His thoughtful consideration of Puerto Rican literary and colonial history emphasizes the impact of two separate colonizing languages on the island, first Spanish and then English. From this perspective, my translation of a subversive post-colonial novel from one colonial language to another takes place in a more complex network of power relations than those that Fanon describes between France and the Antilles. As Otero lays out, because of this complexity, the focus shifts away from which language the discussion takes place in. Historically, confrontation between two colonizing languages in Puerto Rico created space for expression by those not intimately connected to US imperialism or to Spanish colonial power. Otero describes the U.S.-driven industrialization of the island as a force that shook up the established late 19th-century colonial order in Puerto Rico: "Con la industrialización, llegaron a la ciudad los puertorriqueños olvidados y nunca nombraos por nuestra literatura y los nuevos escritores comenzaron a revalorizar nuestra

historia, nuestra sociedad y nuestra cultura” (67).³ Moving chronologically, he describes how the literary movement of the mid-20th century from that point on,

comprenderá que la única pureza que podrá llevar con orgullo es la verdadera pureza de su mestizaje, de su contaminación de razas y de voces que al manifestarse dejan de ser tartamudas sobre su propia historia. De esta irreverencia necesaria frente al discurso y al mundo sacralizados por el poder, surge el nuevo ensayo puertorriqueño (67).⁴

By emphasizing the space for organic cultural growth that emerged from the confrontation between colonial powers, Otero shifts the discussion away from an either/or analysis of local culture and colonizer’s culture. From this perspective, neither the original Spanish text of *Sirena Selena*, nor its English translation is undermined by the fact that it is written in the colonizer’s language. A Puerto Rican text’s ability to confront current imperialism and the colonial legacy can, and must, take place within an imposed language, but it does not lose its disruptive impact as a result. Santos-Febres herself focuses on rupture of normative discourse within existing language, through the rhetorics of the body that began this essay. As Santos-Febres elaborates:

la inscripción del cuerpo dentro de la literatura caribeña responde a una de nombrar la diferencia, la existencia de lógicas, historias, experiencias y

³ With industrialization, forgotten Puerto Ricans who were never named in our literature would arrive in the city and the new writers would begin to revalorize our history, our society and our culture.

⁴ would understand that the only purity it could carry with pride is the true purity of its mixture, of its contamination of races and of voices that, in showing themselves, stop stuttering about their own history. From this necessary irreverence in the face of the discourse and the world that power idolized, emerges the new Puerto Rican essay.

sexualidades diferentes a las permitidas y registradas por el discurso oficial de la cultura occidental. Es una estrategia retórica que crea tensiones dentro del mismo sistema del lenguaje ya que apunta hacia las ausencias y fisuras dentro de sus sistemas de significación. La textualización de género, raza, etnia y clase se dan cita a través de las imágenes del cuerpo y la producción de signos y símbolos corporales que violentan los sistemas lingüísticos tradicionales hasta a veces llegar al punto de la destrucción de la palabra misma” (91).⁵

This view of language systems splintering in the presence of literary representation of the Caribbean body allows Santos-Febres to confront oppressive discourses within the discourse itself. As such, by retaining the disruptive power of Santos-Febres’ rhetoric, my translation does not function simply as a dialogue between two colonizing languages, but rather as a continuation of Santos-Febres’ subversive use of language.

To illustrate the impact that my theoretical understanding of subversive rhetoric had on my translation, I turn to the repetition of *pie* (foot) in chapter 37. Its regular repetition marks the beat of this incredibly poetic chapter, driven by both the musical tempo of the *boleros* Sirena sings and his steady movement down the stairs and across the foyer. Santos-Febres’ use of the word *pie* embodies her rhetorics of the body, as this

⁵ the inscription of the body inside of Caribbean literature is in response to a need to name difference, and the existence of logics, histories, experiences and sexualities that differ from those permitted and registered by the official discourse of western culture. It is a rhetorical strategy that creates tensions within the very language system that already points toward the absences and fissures inside its systems of signification. The textualization of gender, race, ethnicity and class takes place via images of the body and the production of corporeal signs and symbols that violate traditions linguistic systems sometimes to the point of the destruction of the word itself.

appendage continually interrupts the string of images that form this chapter. Translating *pie* directly to “foot,” however, feels clunky and stagnant, losing the active imagery of Sirena’s movement. Lytle solves this problem by translating *pie* to “step,” retaining the rhythmic quality of the word, but losing the corporeal imagery. In order to reconcile both of these demands, I use “footstep,” which creates a different, two syllable rhythm, but includes both the musical, moving quality of the passage and the disruptive presence of the body.

In addition to preserving rhetoric as a means of negotiating colonial power dynamics in my translation, I also focus on preserving difference in order to create a more foreignized translation. My translation pays special attention to retaining distinctions of religious practice, national boundary, race and ethnicity, and between economic and social classes. Each of these differences manifest linguistically in the source text; in some sections regionalisms are so dense that I relied on definitions from an annotated edition of *Sirena Selena* edited by Debora Castillo, intended to help Spanish-speaking readers from outside of Puerto Rico and the Dominican republic. The demand for this edition underlines both the diversity of Spanish-speaking readers and the regional specificity of *Sirena Selena*. Finding a means of retaining this regional diversity in my translation goes against the homogenizing U.S. perspective of the Caribbean. As I mention in the Translator’s Note, I heavily incorporate Spanish words into my translation in order to recreate the experience of code-switching between Spanish and English common in Puerto Rico. For this reason, the chapters of my translation with Dominican narrators have significantly less Spanish. Even then, those words act to indicate a regionally specific practice or identity, again emphasizing cultural difference.

Linguistic regional differences are also often the only indication between a flashback of Sirena's childhood in Puerto Rico and Leocadio's storyline in the Dominican Republic. To the outsider, these differentiations can be so subtle that, often, as one academic points out,

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. (Rodríguez 214)

In my translation, the plot descriptions, section selections, and translation strategies all function together to preserve the kind of difference those reviewers missed. Although my translation renders both Dominican and Puerto Rican Spanish into American English, in the case of Leocadio and Sirena, I try to at least retain their distinct characterization. Here, the narratorial voice plays an important role, as I attempt to recreate the childlike, cautious tone of Leocadio's chapters and the adolescent, driven tone of Sirena's. From Hugo Graubel's disdainful appraisal of the public Bocachica beach to the ironic, theatrical style of Martha's show, the selected chapters in my translation showcase the full spectrum of experiences represented in *Sirena Selena*. I seek to represent difference through this process of selection, along with the recreation of each narrator's distinct rhetorical style. In this way, even within a universalizing, American English translation, I try to assert the diversity of Caribbean experiences as means of contesting dominant imperialist discourses that so often misrepresent Caribbean identity and culture.

IV. Queer Identity in the Caribbean

As I transition to a discussion about translating queer identity and culture in *Sirena Selena*, I would like to emphasize the continuing importance of post-colonial theory in the intersection of queer studies and translation studies. The limited but growing academic work focusing on the translation of foreign queer identities raises issues of American cultural imperialism and the erasure of difference. As Keith Harvey, one of the first translation theorists to address cultural differences in queer self-expression, points out in “Translating Camp Talk: Gay Identities and Cultural Transfer,” gay linguistic modes exist in a wide range of languages. Not only that, they also serve different cultural functions in each linguistic context. As he explains, “It could be assumed from this [use of camp in diverse languages] that when translating such fiction translators need merely to be aware of the comparable resources of camp in source and target language cultures. However, while the formal aspects of camp might appear constant, the functions that camp performs in its diverse contexts are far from uniform” (446). We can see the impact of Harvey’s push for a contextually motivated translation practice of queer modes in the work of academics such as Serena Bassi.

Bassi addresses the problem of translating foreign queer cultures into North American English specifically in “Tick as Appropriate: (A) Gay, (B) Queer, or (C) None of the Above,” her 2014 analysis of translation and sexual politics in one of Lawrence Venuti’s translations. In this piece, Bassi emphasizes the proliferation of LGBT+ media as a global niche market. Much of this queer media is produced in the United States, and depicts a universal gay identity, which in reality is “a situated construct, entrenched in a series of conceptualizations of identity, community, and liberation that originate from

specific U.S. political histories” (299). Much like Harvey, Bassi emphasizes how the spread of North American queer culture, rather than providing easy linguistic equivalencies, instead complicates the responsible translator’s task. As she explains, “To say that a U.S. conceptualization of identity has been exported abroad, into Italy in this case, does not imply that the Italian context has received it passively and has necessarily absorbed it and incorporated the ideologies behind it”(307). The challenge, therefore, for the United States translator is to represent local interpretations of North American influenced queer identities and modes of expressions, in North American English. Rosamond King, with her focus on gender and sexuality in the Caribbean space, drives home the politically fraught nature of using European and North American words to describe nonbinary identities in the Caribbean context:

to use terms from these places [North America and Europe], terms that Caribbean people have neither created nor always identified with, without paying attention to their etymologies and relationship to power seems to commit a further epistemic violence. Finally, using North American or European terms that do not resonate within the region could be seen as supporting the common Caribbean belief that unconventional genders and nonheteronormative sexualities are foreign menaces” (King 21).

Together, Harvey, Bassi and King paint a picture of both U.S. cultural imperialism through queer media, and of regional resistance to it. While this resistance can be homophobic in nature, as King points out, it is also creative and motivated by the specific cultural context in which LGBT+ individuals find themselves, as demonstrated by Bassi and Santos-Febres’ work.

The need for concrete translation solutions to the challenges presented by the U.S. diffusion of queer culture ultimately drive many of the translation choices I discuss in the Translator's Note. Much like my efforts to preserve national and cultural difference, I focus on retaining as much specific vocabulary of identity (i.e. *travesti*, *loca*, *draga*, *closetero*, *indeciso*) as possible, while providing enough contextual understanding so as not to disrupt the English speaking reader's experience. One specific means of providing context that I make use of, is to include the original text along with an English word with similar, though not identical, connotations. Take the line from Chapter 20, "Y closeteros ¿Quiénes son closeteros aquí?" (*Sirena Selena* 111), which does explicitly make the connection between "closetero" and the English phrase "to come out of the closet." In order to make this connection clear, and to retain the sheer ingenuity of this Spanish adaptation of the English language, I included a definition in the second half of the sentence: "And the *closeteros*? Who here is still in the closet?" Through a constant attention to contextually specific modes of queer expression such as these, my goal was to resist imposing contemporary American queer culture on to the characters and the text.

One of the specific questions translating this text raised was the possibility of using nontraditional, gender neutral pronouns to describe Sirena. Especially in the sections of the novel that use neither male nor female pronouns and adjectives, I considered using pronouns such as the singular they, s/he, and zhe as a means of avoiding imposing a gender where none exists in the source text. Ultimately, however, I believe it is vital to linguistically preserve the strict gender binary of the source text in order to showcase Sirena and Leocadio's incredible resourcefulness as they navigate non-binary gender expression in the context of deeply heteronormative cultures.

Sirena Selena, Queen of Dreams is my attempt to translate both their ingenuity and the experience of reading *Sirena Selena, vestida de pena* as responsibly as I can. Through careful attention to unspoken rhetorics, navigation of colonial and imperialist power dynamics, and attention to difference of culture and identity, I hope that this translation recreates a similarly disruptive, immersive, and beautiful reading experience for the American English-speaking audience.

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