SHE SINGS BOLEROS: SANTOS-FEBRES' *SIRENA SELENA*

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What is it about drag—the abstract concept of drag as much as the shock and titillation of specific bodies clothed in particular ways—that makes it so attractive to literary critics? Why does it seem so often to metaphorize for us the potential power and political promise of our own work? One response is that drag glamorizes the mundane tasks of literary critics, who frequently find ourselves in our articles wrapping up a play of identity in a tissue of citation and counterquote, using academic trappings to distance and display our desirous selves. This idea is consonant with Judith Butler's suggestion that the norm of sex "derives its power through the citations that it compels" (13), where the evocative metaphor of "citation" certainly speaks to a scholar's typical practice. Butler further hints that the compelling feature of drag has something to do with its laying bare of the relation between citing and identifying with—another feature that has an obvious attraction to the work of criticism.

Furthermore, Butler holds out the promise that this quality of a powerfully displaced identity formation as figured through drag representations can have larger repercussions as well. If identity in general can best be analyzed "as part of a dynamic map of power" (117), queerness becomes privileged in specific ways for its "reworking of abjection into political agency that might describe why 'citationality' has contemporary political promise" (21). Butler goes on: "The critical promise of drag does not have to do with the proliferation of genders... but rather with the exposure or the failure of heterosexual regimes ever fully to legislate or contain their own ideals.... At its best, then, drag can be read for the way in which hyperbolic norms are dissimulated as the heterosexual mundane. At the same time these same norms, taken not as commands to be obeyed, but as imperatives to be 'cited', twisted, queered, brought into relief as heterosexual imperatives, are not, for that reason, necessarily subverted in the process" (237). Essentially, Butler is pointing out a way that we critics can have our aesthetic cake and

eat it too, since the twisty attractions of drag can accommodate almost any ideological stance. And, if all that were not enough to convince us of the compelling attractions of such citational practices, Tim Dean adds that "insofar as the central concept at stake is imitation—an aesthetic, philosophical, and social problematic," it is entirely appropriate and wholly understandable that professors of literature find themselves attracted to arguments about drag and other transsexual phenomena irrespective of the psychic adequacy of theories of mimesis as an approach to gender (71).

Butler's and Dean's analyses of the nexus drag performativity-citationality-identity-political and social mappings of power provide an excellent point of entry into Mayra Santos-Febres' first novel, and they help us sort out the seductions of the text as well as finding a way of mapping its particular dynamics.[1] *Sirena Selena* describes the adventures of the eponymous hero/ine and her mentor, Miss Martha Divine (or Fiol), as they take their Puerto Rican glamour to the still-benighted Dominican Republic to introduce their sister island to the seductions of drag performance. Martha's is not a wholly altruistic project, however, since US labor laws prevent exploitation of the underage Sirena in her home country in a way that the more lax Dominican Republic would cheerfully ignore. In a parallel story, the reader learns about the lives of a pair of young Dominican boys who work in a local gay bar/hotel catering to tourists and mostly closeted locals. Undergirding this narrative is the allusion to and conflation of at least two mythic/folkloric traditions: that of the Homeric sirens who lured unwary sailors to their deaths with their lovely, seductive song, and that of Anderson's tragic little mermaid, who fell in love with a prince and lost her voice when she changed her fishtail for the painful tortures of human feet.

On another level, Santos-Febres also pays homage to the magisterial representations of the bolero singer in recent Caribbean fiction, ranging from the portrayal of Iris Chacón in Luis Rafael's Sánchez' *La guaracha del Macho Camacho*, to, most signally, Guillermo Cabrera Infante's depiction of "Estrella" in the sections entitled "Ella cantaba boleros" in his *Tres tristes tigres*. Interestingly enough, Cabrera's Estrella, like mermaid/siren of fairy tale and myth, Like Santos-Febres' Sirena, represents the enigmatic source of pure and perfect music deriving from a deeply compromised physical presence. Cabrera Infante's nightclub singer is a self-taught diva, grotesque in appearance, but conveying an absolute perfection of control over her audience when she sings. González Echevarría says, somewhat hyperbolically (although the novel is hyperbolic enough), "her dark powers endow her with an aura of absolute knowledge that is apparently beyond description."[2] It is a power that endures, and in González Echevarría's reading even undergoes a metaphorical gender transformation, after the bolero diva is silenced in death when her body, encased in a monstrous coffin, is set afloat on the Golf Stream: "Her monstrous maternal self

becomes a ramming projectile, an aggressive phallus" (141). What needs to be underscored here is that in both cases, in the recent fiction as well as in ancient myth, there is a disguise and a tragic outcome, along with a hint of something monstrous lurking behind the dissimulations of a sensual promise, an uncanny and insupportably attractive conflation of masculine and feminine characteristics.

Santos-Febres adds to and complicates this classic (and canonically male) vision with a an inverted projection of monstrosity. In her public presentations/performances/readings, she specifically points to her own gendered, raced body as an inevitable signifier, one that she describes as in some sense transvestite with respect to her audience's expectations about the proper gender and race for writerly bodies and identities, especially those authors who choose to write openly about sexuality. Thus, she tells us, in *Sirena Selena* she figures a fictional presentation inspired in her own lived reality as much as in her background research and her creative imagination. Rosemary Feal reminds us that "in recent years, we have witnessed a lively interest on the part of women writers and feminist critics in matters erotic: women have produced new modes of 'sexual fiction' and have provided serious intellectual commentary on how these texts depart from masculinist origins" (216). Santos-Febres cannot help but be set apart from these masculinist origins by reason of a body traversed by the undeniable codes that identify her as ethnic minority and female. Similarly, her own hyperconsciousness of the inevitable reading of her voluntary or involuntary bodily performance—in dust jacket photos as well as book tour presentations—gives a poignant richness to the narrative subtext of her new novel (informal remarks at Cornell University, September 2000). Here too the norms of aesthetic appreciation overlie expectations about proper narrative themes, appropriate authorship, objective critical reception and analysis, tossing us back, as Feal continues, "out onto the stage of performative gender acts, where sexual identification, a fantasy of a fantasy, is symptomatically encoded through imposture and parody" (216). Or, as Martha Divine tells her nightclub audience in her final monologue: "Esta vida moderna le saca el monstruo a cualquiera" (263).

Santos-Febres offers two possibilities for resolving this conundrum of seduction by a beautiful monstrosity, which in this novel is most tellingly ciphered in what we might call the opposition between Truth and Realness. Martha, for example, is a firm believer in the Truth. For that reason, she takes a little drug-addicted Puerto Rican street boy with a wonderful voice and helps him to "convertirse en quien realmente era" (11), a Caribbean drag diva who specializes in singing boleros. Curiously enough, to a considerable extent her labors enact a reelaboration of the prevailing, and heterosexist, concept that the truth of masculinity or femininity involves matching an inner core with the outer appearance. At the same time, Martha knows that

a reiterated performance of a specific desired gender identity reflects and reinforces a presumed inner truth. In Martha's understanding, it is only when the boy is elaborately recreated as the nightclub diva Sirena Selena that she achieves a harmony of the inner and outer selves. Ironically, of course, this truth and harmony are achieved through the wrenchingly bifurcated character of a half-human, half-monstrous, yet wholly seductive mythic figure. This is an equivocal truth at best, underscoring what Muñoz would describe as the "reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short circuit" (6).

This carefully constructed truth requires constant vigilance and high maintenance, and not only because the drag diva needs to mask certain unfortunate primary and secondary sexual characteristics in order to "pass". One problem is that "femininity" and "woman" are themselves equivocal terms in heterosexist culture: as Butler notes, the proper name of woman "can only be a kind of radical mime that seeks to jar the term from its ontological presuppositions" (38). For the drag queen modeling her truth on an image of femininity that is already compromised by miming, this ontological doubt creates both double problems and enormous opportunities. Since the place of woman is always already a kind of performative site, her location in language likewise cannot be other than unstable. Insistence on being/embodying any kind of truth reflects the fear/knowledge that the feminine is propped upon a rhetorical move always shot through with a certain fundamental linguistic impropriety. Since the truth bearer in this case is both a drag performer and a minority citizen, the distance and the impropriety of the performance/being is intensified.

In his work on Latino/a performance artists, Muñoz relies on the useful methodology of "disidentification" as a way to thread his path through an analogous morass. He describes disidentification as "a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production" that serves both as a literary critical method and a performative mode, thus linking together once again the temptations adduced in the very beginning of this paper. For the scholar, this critical method involves the "hermeneutical performance of decoding... any... cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy" (Muñoz 25). For minority subjects, it is "a performative mode of tactical recognition" deployed "in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology" (97). The results may in some cases be painful (to find self means to deny self) or, in better cases, can give rise to a productive "tactical misrecognition" that allows the self to manipulate and work narratives of identity to surpass limits prescribed by dominant ideological culture (95).

For Martha Divine the exigent demands of her art are intimately tied

to this search for a truth defined both as essential core identity and as the process of becoming that which one already is. Nevertheless the equivocal nature of this arduous process constantly reveals its stress points in the slippages of the text's grammatical gender assignments, where the shifting between linguistic reference and felt materiality uncovers the instabilities of a be-ing constantly in flux. Early in the trip to the Dominican Republic, Martha alludes to the young performer as alternately as "mijito" and "hijita", as "su ahijado" and "la nena", as "Sirenito" and as "la Sirena " (21, 24). Sirena too slips between grammatical gender references when thinking of herself; at one point musing: "se supo bello, de Sirena bellísima .... Muchos habían jurado dar cualquier cosa por verlo desnuda, quien sabe si hombre, si mujer" (63-64).

Likewise, Hugo Graubel, Sirena's Dominican lover, sees in her the embodiment of his dreams of an ambivalently gendered partner: "La deseó así, tan chiquita, tan nenito callejero. La reconoció como la mujer de sus sueños" (60) where, equivocally, the woman of his dreams is an ambiguous, half-and-half being: part fragile girl child, part street-tough boy. Most crucially, Martha sees in her promotion of her young protégé a way of finding her own truth in both a literal and figurative sense. This sense of truth naturally comes to rest in an emphasis on what is appropriate, what is proper, what is her own, what can finally be given a single, stable gender. Martha has long imagined her body as an uncomfortable disguise for her true self and, mundanely, hopes with the proceeds of this trip to earn enough to treat herself to a sex change operation: "iba al fin a reconciliarse con su propio cuerpo" (21). Interestingly enough, the operation will effect precisely the inverse change as that of the young boy into Sirena, by converting Martha's monstrous mermaid body into an image of human femininity: "Operarse no es lo mismo que vestirse y eso sólo en carne propia se sabe. Quitarse la ropa y verse, al fin, de cintura abajo igual que de cintura arriba.... Total. Al fin poder descansar en un solo cuerpo" (19). These dreams inevitably collide with reality, and despite Martha's (and Hugo's) intermittent claims to truth, bodies and language never quite collapse comfortably into each other, always remaining at odds, always retaining a reminder of doubleness since the language of essentialism always runs up against the contradictions of the body.

The second option Santos-Febres offers her reader for resolving the mystery of Sirena Selena is not Truth but (hyper)Realness, a quality involving being seen as "fabulous," a word almost always used in this text in a loaded sense, as that figure best captured by the oxymoron of the "perfecto simulacro" (79). Thus, for example, Martha comments on "las hormonas que me hacen fabulosa" (8), and describes another drag queen, La Luisito, as "tan fabulosa como antes, pero los años son los años" (28). When one of the Dominicans raves to Martha about the amazing illusion created

by her art — "Si no se supiera que se trata de una ilusión, jamás podría descubrir el secreto de la Sirena. Se *ve* tan fabulosa"—the aging diva responds sharply: "'*Es* fabulosa-' corrigió Martha" (51, my emphases), thus marking the difference between the common, hyperbolic sense of the word and the drag performer's more precise usage of it to signal a pure, perfect work of art that meshes disguise with essence. Says Butler, "this is citation, not as enslavement or simple reiteration of the original, but as an insubordination that appears to take place within the very terms of the original" (45). Later, in her analysis of *Paris is Burning*, Butler adds: "becoming real, becoming a real woman... constitutes the site of the phantasmatic promise of a rescue.... The contest [or in Santos-Febres' case, the drag performance]. . . involves the phantasmatic attempt to approximate realness, but it also exposes the norms that regulate realness as *themselves* phantasmatically instituted and sustained" (130).

Sirena perfectly embodies this creative act performed on and with the body; realness and the phantasmatic (which is always and necessarily a structure of desire) constitute the very core of her identity/performance. She is a perfect simulacrum, and for her audience the emphasis falls equally on the shattering perfection of her presence as on the knowledge that she is performing a specific gendered identity that is and is not essentially hers. Her voice makes her into a character ("un personaje" 254), while it also reveals her audience's real and secret pain beyond all disguise (291): fictional representation and hyper-real essence at the same time. Sirena too becomes lost in this play of realness: most importantly, when Hugo Graubel demands the right to be her lover as well as her client, to know the real individual behind the fabulous presentation. The catch, of course, is that Graubel loves the simulacrum, as Sirena is all too well aware, and that simulacrum constitutes her real, phantasmatic identity: "Pero para hablar tendría que deshacerse de quien es ella en realidad, de quien tanto trabajo le ha costado ser. ¿Y si se vuelca hacia afuera y no regresa? ¿Quién sería ella entonces?" (256).

Ultimately, as Martha Divine has already intimated, Sirena cum Sirena is—emphasizing the verb *ser*, and not *estar*—fabulous: no more, no less. And being fabulous is a terrible burden and gift. For Martha, Sirena offers realness and a promise of access to truth; the truth of Martha's own improper and bisected body, the promise of eventual wholeness. For herself the performer who specializes in boleros claims that she never liked that particular type of music. They were her grandmother's favorites, and Sirena sings them now recalling her grandmother's pain to inspire her performance. More importantly, despite her ostensible dislike of the form, boleros become an important resource to help the young boy in Sirena's past to survive his own fears and pain, welding his grandmother's preferred form of musical expression to the necessities of his own soul. Boleros were all that came into

his head when he walked the dangerous streets at night, and he sang them to himself to distance himself from his fears of the clients and the reality of what was happening to his body during the time he worked as a street prostitute: "eran el caudal que necesitaba para protegerse para siempre de las noches en la calle" (93).

For the upper-class heterosexual woman, the drag diva who sings boleros is her abject and ideal counterpart. Sirena perfectly dramatizes Solange's frustration and pain, her sadness and suffering, as the lonely and unloved wife of rich industrialist Hugo Graubel (167-168). Solange hates and fears the drag performer on first sight. Sirena possesses the ability to confuse and seduce her, while at the same time the lonely woman implicitly understands that Sirena is the most dangerous of all possible rivals for her husband's affections, a perfect and fabulous and monstrous presence who can easily out-woman Solange woman-to-woman precisely because she is not a woman at all. Drag, says Butler, "allegorizes *heterosexual melancholy*, the melancholy by which... a feminine gender is formed (taken on, assumed) through the incorporative fantasy by which the feminine is excluded as a possible object of love" (235). The passive and typically mournful bolero lyric serves as a perfect medium for expressing this melancholy impossibility of heterosexual happiness while it explicitly forecloses the fantasy of any other form of love.

The melancholic Puerto Rican drag performer also offers the potential for what Muñoz describes as a queerer drag for bi/homosexual consumption; this is the modality that he identifies with specific forms of politicized drag, a kind of drag performance that aims at "creating an uneasiness, an uneasiness in desire, which works to confound and subvert the social fabric" (100). In *Sirena Selena* part of the uneasiness effect comes through juxtaposition. Hugo echoes his wife's sentiment on hearing Sirena sing, imagining the drag performer as "vestida por completo de su rabia y su dolor, igual a como él va vestido por dentro del suyo" (173). Just as Sirena perfectly mimics and exposes Solange's pain, the suffering of a woman excluded from love by the nature of her gender, so too she materializes the hidden frustrations of Solange's closeted husband, who dreams of his ideal woman as a kind of realized allegory from a bolero, but one who comes to him with a big dick under her silk and sequins.

While the elegant presentation of Sirena Selena ranks high on the realness/glamour scale and thus would seem closer to what Muñoz describes as commercial or corporate-sponsored drag (99), we are never allowed to forget that her seductive body is a bifurcated and monstrous one, that her compelling voice leads dreaming sailors to their doom. For aging diva Martha Divine, one of the attractions of the bolero-singing street boy is making him up to reveal his contradictory and essential doubleness, his mermaid-nature: "Martha disipaba la gula y la sorpresa ante el tamaño

genital de su ahijadita. Asombrada, no se podía explicar cómo de un cuerpito tan frágil y delgado, colgara semejante guindalejo" (48). The defiantly male genitals keep open the space for textual vacillation in this novel. It is exactly this unexpected combination of delicate femininity and a grotesquely large penis that inspires Martha to create the mysterious performer, and it is her inability to fully control her protégé or to forget his secret as she struggles and plans to finally have the operation that will obviate hers that keeps her attraction alive. For Hugo Graubel, as well, the indeterminacy of his lover's body spurs desire; as he reflects at one point, on seeing the young performer at the beach: "Su cuerpito... parecía el de una adolescente marimacha jugando a ser hombrecito en la playa, pero dejándose conocer femme por sus brincos y gritos ante la basura" (59). In both cases the disavowed identification, the disidentification, is constitutive. It enables an identity between inner self and outer presence while by-passing the unspeakable origin of attraction, the repudiated and insuperable site that links the truth of appearances and the falsehood of desire. The mermaid's body, then, becomes a kind of effectively enabled micro-utopic site, whose mysteries are accessible within the rules of the game.

Lest we get too carried away by this analysis, we need to remind ourselves, as Santos-Febres reminds us, that all this realness is the product of a good deal of hard work and constant vigilance. As Martha says in her final monologue of the novel, overtly describing her philosophy of life, "todo en esta vida require ensayo" (265). Sirena learns this lesson well, consciously taking on the personality that defines her and using it both to attract her public and defend her inner self against their importunities. Thus, for example, when an overenthusiastic fan gives her a frighteningly overlong kiss, "Sirena asumió de nuevo su papel de mujer misteriosa" (12) to defend herself. In the Dominican Republic, she covers her insecurity about her public persona when she orders cab driver to wait for her, "asumiendo del todo su papel de estrella" (65). While getting ready for the performance at Graubel's house, she meticulously arranges his furniture so that his possessions "serían al fin el escenario perfecto para que Sirena Selena pueda en serio convertirse en su imagen" (110). Her task in this instance is made more difficult by the fact that she will not be performing in a drag bar, but in the rich couple's home, and she will be mingling with their high society guests: "no quería desentonar con nada, ni con los invitados, ni con la decoración. Aquel trabajo era más difícil de lo que ella supuso en un principio" (156). Adding to her pre-performance stress, she intuitively understands that Graubel wants from her one kind of performance—that of a street-wise, boy-toy whore—when she has officially contracted for a different one—that of inexpressibly elegant and unapproachable chanteuse: "sospecheba lo que se aproximaba. Este rico que la contrataba quería conversación, confesiones de vida sórdida, misteriosos encuentros que le

alimentaran el juego de la seducción. Pero ella no estaba ahora para esos juegos. Ella tenía que ensayar, asegurarse que su performance quedaría intachable, perfecto" (130-131). All gender identity, suggests Butler, is sedimented in repetition, and this general observation is given a particular twist when applied to the drag performer's determination that to be is to be fabulous. It is the constant and continued reiteration of the role that gives the young drag diva her own hard-won sense of her ritual identity as the fabulous and mysterious Sirena, the incomparable bolero singer.

One performance that is given a good deal of attention in the novel is the carefully plotted seduction of/by Hugo Graubel, "el Verdadero Cliente". For Graubel, Sirena represents as she performs what he understands to be his impossible dream of the perfect woman given fleshy realization. Sirena is fully aware of the Graubel's obsession and prepares meticulously for the staging of her own seduction. In an important chapter omitted from the printed version of the novel, the protagonist meditates carefully on this point: "no dirá nada que no haya mil veces ensayado" (mss 243)—creating from his/her concrete reality the impersonation of the impossible dream of the perfect (and abstract) Client: "'Calcula, mamita, calcula' piensa la Selena, cada sonrisa de su repertorio ejecutada a la mayor perfección. Examina su pose reflejada en los pisos de mármol, piensa en su maquillaje y en su blush... y piensa 'el artificio es mi movida...'" (mss 242). The artifice sustains itself in visual confirmation. Sirena's self-presentation in real and imagined mirrors, unsurprisingly, is crucial to her citational practice.

The metaphor of reflection serves as a conduit for self-knowledge and as a fatal trap. Sirena's first mentor, Valentina Frenesí, dies when she finds that she is unable to escape from the image of her own impeccable beauty. Ambiguously overlaying a common term for a mirror and the street name of a popular drug, Santos-Febres writes lyrically of Valentina's overdose in another omitted section that provides an important clue for understanding the narrative: "otra vez derretirse, no salir de este cristal" (mss 112). This leit motiv returns with the narrator's description of Graubel as a man who "toda su vida la había vivido a través de cristales" (131), and even in bed with Sirena "lo veía todo entre cristales, entre una bruma, como en el cine" (134). His most intimate expressions of his feelings are circumscribed by self citation, with a bitter twist. Both he and his wife remember the halcyon days of their budding relationship and Graubel's passionate asseveration: "Te amaré Solange, como siempre quise amar a una mujer" (162). This phrase, much repeated throughout the novel, has in the first instance the quality we have come to expect of tired bolero lyrics; already in his relationship with his wife Graubel is inventing/representing himself and her as if in a mirror as the very images of the beloved for each other. When, lost in the intensity of his passion for Sirena, Graubel repeats the same phrase to his young

lover—"Te amaré, como siempre quise amar a una mujer"—both the sincerity and the artifice of the expression redouble, reminding us of Dean's comment that "there is no sexual relation at the symbolic level because each subject couples with the signifier of the Other, rather than with another subject" (85).

Graubel and Sirena are effectively short-circuited in their dance of mutual representation for the other and barred from the "as if" of love: he loves the performative femininity in her (Solange/Sirena) as he always wanted to love a woman, as if s/he were that woman, an ideal Woman. He echoes back to Sirena the cliched formulas that she so ably represents and that form the basis of her identity as the fabulous diva, needing to love her like the ideal bolero character while loving her precisely because she is not, because she mirrors his desire in a way no woman ever could. For her part, Sirena is deeply uncomfortable because "algo en Hugo la hacía vulnerable a la realidad" (234), eating away at the artifice that she is. It would be all too easy to fall into trap of the Client's adoration, turning from realness to the real—so she sings boleros in her head to distance herself from what is happening with/to her body, keeping love at bay by imbuing herself with sappy love songs and representing the very essence of their appeal. At the back of her mind she recalls, perhaps, the warning from another diva, a veteran, who shares her accumulated wisdom with the younger drag queens during long nights at the Danubio Azul: "Es malo el amor en esta vida. Para cualquiera es malo, pero para una loca, es la muerte" (140).

Young Leocadio, the Dominican whom Martha identifies at the end of the novel as the potential next Sirena, concludes from his brief experience in the Dominican gay bar that "hay muchas formas de mandar, muchas formas de ser hombre o ser mujer" (258). Leocadio's observation persists at the end of the novel as a utopic dream, and one that Martha urgently needs to share in order to continue living, the counterpart to the blunt poetic dedicatory of the novel: "Tú eres el recuerdo de remotos orgasmos reducidos a ensayos de recording" (7). Leocadio's statement reminds the reader of the power and insistence of the dream of love, even though the very first page of this narrative already warns us of a basic insufficiency in the citation of love (especially through the bolero) that serves as the foundational analogy for this text. Thus, finally, the reflections given back to the client in the mirror—of the drag performance, of the bolero lyrics—are both true and fatally flawed. The dream of love is refracted through a performative matrix of frequently embittered and displaced desire, of phantasmatic pleasures that mediate exchanges only at the level of artifice and image, and of forms of love all the more potent because of repeated experiences of disappointment or rejection.

Sirena is and must remain a fabulous creature in both senses of the word; she seduces us only to disappear from the novel and back into legend.

Thus it is Martha who brings us back home, she who serves as our anchoring vision, our point of view character, and it is she who is given the last word in the text. By the end of the story, she triumphs in her dealings with the slippery businessmen from the Dominican Republic, recognizing in them the insecurities of their situation as "tapaditos" (227), and offering the kind of maternal nurturing for which they secretly yearn, uncovering their hidden desires, their fledgling drag selves. She has a new partner—Stan the huge blonde man from the Hotel Colón whom she teaches the secrets of glamour in a long cross dressing and makeup session—and the promise of a new show targeting the tourist crowd and featuring bilingual Puerto Rican drag artists. Sirena has vanished, and Martha is philosophical about her loss; besides, she has the prospect of a new protégé in Leocadio: "tiene algo ese nenito, tiene algo. Igualito a lo que tenía la Sirena. Quien sabe. La vida da muchas vueltas. Y aún le quedan bríos en los implantes. Quizás pueda volver a empezar" (262). Martha's last word is neither naively optimistic nor tragic. Life goes on, and new challenges replace old disappointments.

Martha's character has evolved considerably in the text. In the early parts of the narrative, she explicitly describes Puerto Rico as the "antesala a Nueva York" (64) and defines her own claim to authority as deriving from three years in New York City where she interacted with the "jet-set del drag" and met the "dragas más fabulosas del planeta" (118). From the Dominican perspective, in contrast, there is initially a good deal of hesitation about dealing with Puerto Ricans. The Dominican businessmen Martha meets tend to see Puerto Rico as blessed by less poverty than their own country, but rotten with crime and drugs (199). Martha's ability to deal with these various prejudices (her own engrained inferiority complex with respect to the drag scene in New York as well as the Dominican prejudice against Puerto Ricans) reveals gradually her complex and evolving character. Further: more than any other character in the novel, she articulates the issues specific to queer Latin Americans, and especially queer Puerto Ricans, caught between the propaganda machines of two vast and competing dominant cultures. The realization of her own sophistication during this trip is immensely empowering. Once she fully understands that in the Dominican Republic "la verdad era que las cosas para las locas no estaban tan adelantadas como en Puerto Rico" (226), she also comes to a fuller sense of her own process of self-reliance, and self-worth: "ya no tendremos que viajar a Nueva York a competir con las dragas rubias que mastican desde infantes el difícil" (176).

Instead of engaging these futile exercises, she proposes to her audience at the Danubio Azul that Puerto Rican drag activists can serve as trendsetters themselves; for instance, they can go to Russia and serve as guides and spiritual mentors: "Porque coaching van a necesitar las pobrecitas. Tantos años privados de todo, sin películas de Hollywood, sin *Vogue*, sin *Elle*

traducidas al ruso" (178). The Puerto Rican drag divas, with their double heritage of US and Latin American cultural references, are uniquely positioned for their potential leadership role. They have at their fingertips both the sensual Latin roles that cast them as mysterious and exotic, and access to the US meritocratic ideal that tells people that they can construct their own identities and be whatever they want to be. And they can read English. Thus, at the end of the novel, Santos-Febres exercises a certain sleight of hand in the story. For if the reader, like the audience in the drag show, tends to focus on the mysterious and seductive diva who sings boleros, it is not the singing or the fabulousness that finally remain, but rather the patient work of Martha Divine. Tellingly, she endures.

Martha, like the literary critic, creates identities through recourse to citational practices. She is, finally, our kind of girl. Dean, in responding to Marjorie Garber's conclusion that cross-dressing does cultural work, emphasizes that "drag also performs a good deal of *theoretical* work" (71). The nature of this work says something about the methodologies of literary studies specifically and cultural studies in general, about the notion of appropriation and its relation to mimesis, about essential roles and constructed identities, about the puzzle of truth, and the real, and realness in speaking to theoretical functions.

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NOTE

[1] Mayra Santos-Febres (Puerto Rico, 1966) is the author of two collections of poems: *Anamú y Manigua* (Río Piedras: Ed. La Iguana Dorada, 1991) and *El orden escapado* (First prize, *Tríptico* journal 1988; pub. Hato Rey: Editorial Tríptico, 1991); two collections of short stories: *Pez de vidrio* (Letras de Oro Prize; first pub. Miami: Iberian Studies Institute, 1995; reprinted in expanded edition Puerto Rico: Huracán, 1996; English translation, *Urban Oracles*, trans. Nathan Budoff and Lydia Platon Lázaro, Cambridge, Mass: Lumen, 1997) and *El cuerpo correcto* (Juan Rulfo Prize, pub. San Juan: R & R Editoras, 1998). *Sirena Selena* was published almost immediately in English (St. Martin's Press) and Italian (Marco Tropea), as well as Spanish, with other translations following in short order.

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