

MARGINALIZED GROUPS AND THE MIRROR IMAGE IN THE WORKS OF MAYRA SANTOS-FEBRES

Resumen

Nuestra señora de la noche se basa en la figura histórica de Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, una madama legendaria de Ponce a principios del siglo XX. Santos-Febres utiliza el personaje de Isabel la Negra para simbolizar una rebelión en contra del racismo y la subyugación de la mujer por la sociedad patriarcal en Puerto Rico. Utilizando la teoría sociológica de Aída Hurtado, se demuestra cómo las acciones de los personajes femeninos de la novela giran en torno al hombre blanco encarnado en el personaje Fernando Fornarís. Se demuestra también cómo la reacción de rebelión de Isabel la Negra se funda en el rechazo por parte de Fornarís, quien la abandona, embarazada, para casarse con una mujer blanca de la alta sociedad. De modo semejante, se desarrolla la manera en que el alcoholismo y la locura de la esposa blanca legítima se deben a su dependencia total del hombre blanco dominante en la sociedad. En este sentido, Fornarís se convierte en el eje narrativo de la novela.

Palabras clave: *Nuestra señora de la noche, Mayra Santos Febres, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, Isabel la Negra, Aída Hurtado*

Abstract

Nuestra señora de la noche is based on the historical figure Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, a legendary madam from Ponce who lived in the early twentieth century. Santos-Febres uses the character Isabel la Negra to symbolize a rebellion against racism and the subjugation of women by patriarchal society in Puerto Rico. Using the sociological theory of Aída Hurtado, the article demonstrates how the actions of the female characters rotate around the white male incarnated in the character Fernando Fornarís. The article also shows how Isabel's reaction of rebellion is based on her rejection by Fornarís, who abandons a pregnant Isabel to marry a white woman of high society. Similarly, the article develops the way in which the alcoholism and madness of the legitimate white wife are due to her total dependency on the white male who is dominant in society. In this sense, Fornarís becomes the narrative axis of the novel.

Keywords: *Nuestra señora de la noche, Mayra Santos Febres, Isabel Luberza Oppenheimer, Isabel la Negra, Aída Hurtado*

Mayra Santos-Febres has won acclaim both as a leading contemporary Puerto Rican poet and fiction writer. Her poetry includes: *Anamú y manigua* (1991), *El orden escapado* (1991), and *Tercer Mundo* (1999). She has also published three collections of short stories: *Pez de vidrio* (1994), *Pez de vidrio y otros cuentos* (1996) and *El cuerpo correcto* (1998), and four novels: *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (2000), *Cualquier miércoles soy tuya* (2002), *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006) and *Fe en disfraz* (2009). Her short story "Oso blanco," earned her the distinguished Juan Rulfo Prize.

Despite Santos Febres' assertion of her failure to perceive any connection between her stories and novel *Sirena Selena*, other than a "preoccupation with the urban Caribbean experience" (Morgado 2), these works share a focus on the perspectives of various marginalized groups (women, lesbians, people of color, and gay transvestites). Thus, her works may be seen as a possible site of convergence of the application of lesbian/gay, queer and feminist theories.

Many of Mayra Santos Febres' short stories from her collections *Pez de vidrio* and *El cuerpo correcto*, as well as her novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, express the dilemma of marginalized groups in society who attempt to construct their own identities. Santos-Febres works oscillate between two critical tendencies which are outlined below: the construction and deconstruction (questioning) of the notion of identity.¹ In the instances of identity-construction, Santos-Febres' characters recur to the mirror image and/or visual, nonverbal elements as a form of expression and means of constituting an identity. The changing contexts of the use of the visual/mirror image lead to the construction of both alienated and authentic identities for the characters in Santos Febres' fiction.

¹ Several articles focus on the question of identity in Santos Febres' novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*. Peres Alós and Kahmann in "La ruptura con el continuum sexo-género-deseo: algunos apuntes sobre la novela *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*" analyze the novel in terms of Judith Butler's ideas on gender, while Rubén Rodríguez Jiménez, "Escritura transsexual y borrón de identidad en *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*," discusses how transsexualism deconstructs both racial and sexual identity in the text. Elba D. Birmingham-Pokorny, "Reclaiming the Female Body, Culture, and Identity in Mayra Santos-Febres's 'Broken Strand,'" focuses on how colonization affects female identity in one story from *Pez de vidrio*, "Broken Strand." Although identity has been the focus of many of the existing articles on Santos-Febres, none has as yet considered the role of the visual/mirror image in identity construction, and little critical analysis of her short stories has been realized, with the exception of Birmingham-Pokorny's article, and another by Carmen Pérez, "Marina y su olor" y "Hebra rota": Lo maravilloso y lo mítico."

According to Robert Ellis, the fundamental difference between lesbian/gay studies and queer theory lies in their approach to the concept of identity. Gay/lesbian studies aim "to make visible a sexual identity that has been closeted within the text or through the workings of a heteronormative critical establishment complicitous with the erasure of lesbian and gay sexuality" (4). This type of criticism posits the existence of sexual identity, in contrast to queer theory which emphasizes "the constructedness of sexuality... [and questions] the very epistemological structure implied by an ontology of identity. Lesbian/gay critique struggles to intervene in and change an oppressive social system; queer critique... seeks to expose this system in its entirety as a system" (Ellis 4). A common point between queer theory and feminism, (defined in its broadest sense as movements designed to better women's position and rights in society), is their mutual distrust of the notion of identity. According to Nina Manasan Greenberg, one of the fundamental concerns of feminism is the problematic nature of the concept of identity. Citing an article by Denise Riley, Greenberg indicates that identity is "a double-edged weapon" because on the one hand, it "changes according to context, so that meanings are never fixed but aren'tism cannot be taken for granted by feminism" (9-10). On the other hand, Greenberg and Riley note the importance of the process of self-identification for most individuals (9-10).

Despite the aforementioned contradictions surrounding the term "identity" among certain critics, others such as Evelyn Hammonds in "Black(W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," suggest the use of the visually erotic as a site of communication and identity for marginalized groups. Hammonds explains that in the past, black feminist theorists have described black women's sexuality in terms of absence and silence. Hammonds, citing Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, points out that this strategy was used to diffuse the stereotype of the sexually immoral black woman (142-243). Hammonds emphasizes the importance of both the visual and the mirror image in the process of black lesbian identity formation:

It is my belief that what is desperately needed is more rigorous cultural criticism detailing how power is deployed through issues like sexuality and the alternative forms that even an oppressed subject's

power can take... Visibility in and of itself, however, is not my only goal. Several writers, including bell hooks, have argued that one answer to the silence now being produced on the issue of black female sexuality is for black women to see themselves, to mirror themselves. The appeal to the visual and the visible is deployed as an answer to the legacy of silence and repression (Hammonds 151-152).

Hammonds sees this visual emphasis as a link between black heterosexual and black lesbian women because the visual focus on passion and desire by such writers as Audre Lorde, "suggests that black lesbian sexualities can be read as one expression of the reclamation of the despised black female body" (Hammonds 148). Lorde distinguishes between pornography, which suppresses feeling in favor of pure sensation, and the erotic, which is an actualization of feeling to full capacity. Consequently, Lorde views the erotic as an untapped source of power that can be a catalyst for political action and societal change, whereas pornography is a source of women's oppression (Lorde 340).

Hammonds' emphasis on the breaking of silence through the use of the erotic/ visual/mirror image suggests potential connections with a larger body of feminist work on the topics of language and silence. The debate on the differing identity/expression of women and other marginalized groups has its origins in the 1970s muted-group theory which posits that non-dominant societal sectors, such as women and people of color, cannot express all zones of their experience through language, which has largely been created and used by white males. This theory was first put forth by Shirley and Edwin Ardener (*Perceiving Women*, 1975). It suggests that consequently, women and blacks often recur to symbolic ritual and other nonverbal forms in order to express themselves (Ardener, viii-ix). Over the past three and a half decades, theorists ranging from the French feminists of the 1970s through sociolinguists in the 1980s and 1990s have proposed women's problematic relationship to male-dominated language,² stressed their development of their own unique writing,³ suggested that

² See Dale Spender, *Man-Made Language*.

³ The French feminists, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva emphasize the creation of an "écriture féminine" in their works that differs from male writing, primarily due to what Kristeva terms its semiotic (open, nonlinear, poetic) nature. See: Hélène Cixous, *Writing the Feminine*; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is not One*; and Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

women speak differently than men,⁴ and proposed their use of a non-passive, subversive silence.⁵ This emphasis on the silence and nonverbal forms presents an interesting coincidence with Hammonds' notion of the erotic/visual as a key to understanding black female sexuality, since the visual can also be seen as a nonverbal expressive mechanism.

The first story by Santos-Febres that illustrates the importance of the visual/mirror image in the construction of identity is the opening story of the collection *Pez de vidrio*, titled "Nightstand." The story portrays Steffanie's search for a rich man to bestow luxury and social status upon her. The commodity which Steffanie trades for these gifts is her body, described visually in terms of her mode of dress and her reflection in multiple mirrors:

Allá va, oronda la niña, oronda y cansada de sus senos y de sus nalgas. Cómo las había bailoteado aquella noche, cómo las había paseado para arriba y para abajo por las calles de San Juan, con sus tacos nuevos y su pelo nuevo, con sus ojos nuevos y su sexo nuevecito y oloroso a cosa chata, playera, de cerda de sal. Cómo se había reído encontrándose en las vitrinas doble y triplemente repetida, los maniqués de último modelo tan parecidos a ella... repetido ad delirum en cuanto carro encerado y vitrina, en cuanto espejo retrovisor, en cuando ojo vidrioso y salivante (13).

Steffanie's identity is not constructed through her sexual behavior *per se*, but rather through the emphasis she places on material goods, of which her body proves to be just one more that she is willing to trade for "un Volvo y no un Subaru" (13). Steffanie is searching for a man with three keys: one to a prestigious office, one to an apartment in the fancy Condado section of town, and one to the aforementioned Volvo. Thus, the narrator sarcastically describes Steffanie's partner's penis as "the fourth key" when he/she narrates Steffanie's sexual encounter (15). Moreover, this passage highlights Steffanie's alienated state as a woman in pursuit of frivolous goals who uses her body to obtain wealth and social status, by describing how

⁴ See the sociolinguistic studies of Deborah Tannen, *Talking Voices: Repetition, dialogue, and imagery in conversational discourse* and *Gender & Discourse*.

⁵ See Marjorie Agosín, *Las hacedoras: Mujer, imagen, escritura*; Lucía Guerra-Cunningham, "Las sombras de la escritura: Hacia una teoría de la producción literaria de la mujer latinoamericana,"; Josefina Ludmer, "Tretas del débil,"; and Debra Castillo, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism*; and Helene Carol Weldt-Basson, *Subversive Silences: Nonverbal Expression and Implicit Narrative Strategies in the Works of Latin American Women Writers*.

Steffanie was “thinking about something else” while she engaged in sex with the man she picked up at the bar. She is alienated from her own sexual enjoyment by her materialistic focus on what she can gain from her sexual partner. The contextualization of Steffanie’s sexuality/mirror image within a list of material objects and physical locations (cars, apartments, fancy offices), converts it into a cipher of an alienated, superficial identity rather than an authentic self-expressive sexual passion via the visual image.

The mirror image also characterizes “Dilcia M,” where it is constituted by the presence of a youthful photograph of the protagonist which she contemplates within her prison cell. Dilcia is a political prisoner who masturbates while gazing at her own photograph:

Igual acabó rápido por temor a que la vinieran a interrumpir como a veces hacían con tal de avergonzarla. Con las manos aún mojadas cogió la foto; con la cara aún mojada la miró. Se miró y con las yemas húmedas se bordeó el rostro doble, el de ella, el de la foto. Reconoció que hacía el amor a ella, a la Dilcia Marina que había sido a los diecisiete años y la que ahora estaba volviendo a ser en aquella celda” (54).

Dilcia’s identification with her former self (her pre-revolutionary, preincarcerated identity) through the visual/mirror image of the photograph within the prison cell, symbolizes the alienation she suffers from her twelve year imprisonment. Dilcia “returns” to her pre-revolutionary, high school girl identity at the story’s end, through her loss of her political loyalty and identity. She can no longer appear to believe in her political cause and feels an urgent need to be liberated from her jail or she will risk becoming a traitor to the revolution (56).

The story “Hebra rota,” also presents the mirror image as a sign of identification and alienation, in this case from one’s own culture. The protagonist, Yetsaida, is a young black girl whose dream in life is to be beautiful by straightening her hair at Miss Kety’s beauty parlor. The characters Yetsaida and Miss Kety are constructed as identical or mirror images in the text through several similarities. The first is the visual focus on their broken noses, which reflects a social reality beyond this purely visual image:

Doña Kety tiene la nariz rota de un puñetazo... Y se sacude la nariz rota, que también sacude la neófita [Yetsaida],... Se ríe, ríen juntas la neófita y doña Kety... La mano experta se posa ahora en la nariz rota de Yetsaida. -Ah, tú también-. -Sí-. Y doña Kety siente algo como una cosquillita del pasado correrle por el mapamundi del antebrazo.

The second point of identification between Yetsaida and Miss Kety is their desire for assimilation into white society symbolized by the hair-straightening process they undergo. The story describes how Miss Kety has a Tresemé protein treatment once a week, while the plot focus of “Hebra rota” is Yetsaida’s first visit to Miss Kety’s salon to get her hair straightened. Moreover, Yetsaida’s greatest aspiration in life is to attend Sky Academy for Beauty and open up her own beauty salon, just like Miss Kety’s. Thus, “Hebra rota” constructs black female identity as alienated from its cultural heritage. The fact that the strand of hair in the title is “broken,” is not insignificant, because it symbolically signals Yetsaida’s “break” with black physical identity at the same time that it refers to the condition of her hair.

In contrast with these three stories, “Espejo con salmuera” from *El cuerpo correcto* uses the visual/mirror image as a means of constructing an authentic sexual identity through a genuine, fulfilling sexual encounter. “Salmuera” (“Brine”) is the odor that Santos-Febres consistently associates with her female characters (see “Pez de vidrio” as well), while the word “mirror” in the title clearly suggests the importance of the visual image in the story. In this case, the mirror takes the form of identical appearance between the two bi-sexual women who are lovers in the story:

Exacta y recompueta, con su Roman Color #37 en la boca mahones pegados con mi bufanda al cuello como vendría yo a ella como he llegado a ella después de volar. Salió del avión, llegó a donde se recogen las maletas. La saludé por el cristal. Ella pegó la boca al cristal. Yo la besé en la boca frente a todos, a través del cristal sin darme cuenta (20).

Later on, when they are making love, the narrator associates her partner with the mirror once again: “ella repetida... huele a motel a espejo... espejo con salmuera” (21). The female lover is a mirror through which the narrator sees herself and constructs her own identity. The coincidence of dress and makeup between the two women is presented as a sign of perfect

communication that contrasts with the lack of the same in the relationships these women have with the men in their lives:

- hoy no me quiso mirar. estaba arreglando un cuadro
- y no pensó si era yo quien lo estaba besando
- el otro me quiere demasiado, como si el mundo fuera un satélite de mi tobillo. Yo no quiero que me adoren. tan sólo quiero...
- exactamente
- ¿tú ves? (19)

It is clear that the men in these women's lives have no interest in understanding them. This is emphasized by the fact that one of the men refused to look at the female narrator, since visual markers fix identity in the text. In contrast, the comprehension between the two women is perfect, to the point that they don't even have to finish verbalizing their thoughts and feelings. They comprehend each other without speaking because they are "mirror images" and share the same zone of female experience. Lesbian love is constructed as a more authentic sexual identity for the protagonists.

In "Pez de vidrio," it is not a coincidence that the protagonist, Juliana, observes her co-worker at a lesbian bar through a mirror:

Entonces la vio... y empezó a observar a aquella mujer *desde el espejo de enfrente*. Ella seguía sentada, recostada contra el vitral de un pez de vidrios rojos y azules que parecía tragarse toda la luz del recinto, preciosa, con su cara larga y ovalada, como deberían ser las uñas de un centauro, y la melena suelta, riza, semejante a una pubis inmensa (19, my emphasis).

This passage is significant for several reasons. First, at the beginning of the story, Juliana considers denying her own lesbian identity by telling her co-worker that she has never before been to a lesbian bar and entered "por mera curiosidad" (19). Despite this initial reaction, Juliana reveals her own lesbian desire through her passionate, visual description of her co-worker in which she metaphorizes her appearance as a hyperbolized sexual organ. This description becomes even more significant if we consider that fact that is rendered by observation through a mirror. The mirror image suggests Juliana's identification with her lesbian co-worker, and hence her own lesbian identity. Finally, this identification implied by the visual mirror im-

age is further developed through another nonverbal marker, the common fragrance of a stained glass fish, which is both hinted at in the former passage (through the stained glass window in the shape of a fish) and later associated with all women: “Pensó [Juliana] que jamás habría otra forma de entenderse con nadie más que con ella, porque de seguro ella sabía cómo hacer brotar ese olor preciso, ese olor propio, natural y remoto, el olor a pez de vidrio que habita en los senos de todas las mujeres del universo” (22).⁶

Sirena Selena vestida de pena (2000) also employs the visual/mirror image in relation to another marginalized group, gay transvestites. The novel presents the lives of the aging drag queen, Martha Divine, and her fifteen year old protégé, Sirena Selena. While Martha dreams of financing a sex-change operation and eventual retirement through exploiting Sirena Selena’s haunting voice, Sirena searches for his own identity through his singing as a female impersonator and his sexual relationships. The novel, although very different in many ways from the stories of *El cuerpo correcto* and *Pez de vidrio*, also focuses on the role of the mirror image in identity construction as well as the communicative power of the visual, particularly through dress for marginalized groups.

Vern L. Bullough and Bonnie Bullough explore the connections between dress as a visual signifier and identity in their book *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. According to the Bulloughs, transvestites exhibit what is termed “cross-gendered behavior” which means that they “do not fit neatly into either the male or female box, or their behavior is not totally congruent with the rules and expectations of the society they live in” (313). The authors explain that cross-gendered people depart from societal norms in two ways: either with regard to sexual orientation or “the area of symbolic expression of gender through clothing” (313). The gay transvestites of *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* form an interesting point of convergence of gay/lesbian and queer theories. On the one hand, these characters posit a formulation of identity through identification with the feminine (through mode of dress), on the other, they posit a rupture with the notion of identity, through a

⁶ Note that fragrances form another silent, nonverbal and yet communicative element in Santos-Febres’ texts. The best example of this is her story “Marina y su olor,” from *Pez de vidrio*, in which the protagonist’s body absorbs the odors around her and can emit a variety of smells based on her feelings and circumstances.

conflation of the categories male/female and hence a rupture with the notion of traditional gender identity. Through visual descriptions of the mirror, cross-dressing and homosexual erotic encounters, *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* simultaneously asserts identities vilified by society and questions traditional categories of identity.

Just as Santos-Febres uses the mirror image in many of her short stories, *Sirena Selena*, the protagonist of her first novel, also views himself and his transformation into a woman through cross-dressing, in front of a mirror. As *Sirena Selena* is reflected in the mirror, his mentor, Martha Divine, applies make-up and clothing in a meticulous process that culminates in a graphic description of his sexual organ:

Entró al baño tocador la maestra de ilusiones con su caja repleta de bases, polvos, afeites postizos y magia. Sentó a la Sirenita entoallada frente a un espejo iluminado por montones de bombillas relucientes, dispuestas a todo lo largo y a todo lo ancho del marco... aplicó hasta el cuello de la Sirena una pasta de base pancake marrón rojizo para tapar las áreas ensombrecidas de la barbilla... Aquella base era arma fundamental en la guerra declarada contra la propia biología... Faltaba aún el rito de las gasas y el esparadrupo para el estoqueo, que no era nada fácil... La verga de *Sirena* era inmensa, un poquito grotesca por la falta de proporción que guardaba con el resto del cuerpo... (45-49, my emphases).

This passage is followed by a description of Martha Divine's attempts to control the sexual passion he/she feels upon seeing *Sirena Serena's* penis. Just as in "Pez de vidrio," the mirror reflects a hyperbolized sexual organ as a symbol and affirmation of gay/lesbian sexual desire.

The relationship between identity and dress is emphasized through other transvestites in the novel. For example, Martha narrates the story of Luisito Cristal, whose mode of dress inspires his name and hence the identity he assumes within the gay transvestite community or "ambiente":

Le decíamos Cristal porque siempre iba a la discoteca envuelta en luces y rhinestones, en gowns de vidrio y bisutería. Le encantaba el brillo. Yo la conozco desde hace tiempo, de cuando hacía shows en el Flying Saucer, trepada en las tarimas para go-go dancers, vestida con leotardos plateados, capas de plástico traslúcido y botas recubiertas de cristal. Un escándalo la Luisito... (28-31).

The name "crystal" also suggests the idea of reflection through a glass and hence associates identity with the mirror image. Moreover, Luisito inspires others, such as Kiki, to assert his transvestite identity after watching Luisito dance at the Flying Saucer. This event allows Kiki to begin cross-dressing.

The theme of transvestism and the flexible manner in which Sirena Selena (and all the cross-dressing characters) is alternately referred to as he or she, also suggests an implicit questioning of gender identity and roles within the narrative. Indeed, the depiction of novelistic relationships between gay men in many ways confirms Judith Butler's observations on heterosexuality and homosexuality in her book, *Gender Trouble*. Butler states:

My own conviction is that the radical disjunction posited by Wittig between heterosexuality and homosexuality is simply not true, that there are structures of psychic homosexuality within heterosexual relations and structures of psychic heterosexuality within gay and lesbian relationships (Butler, 155).

Santos-Febres illustrates these structures of psychic heterosexuality both through cross-dressing and within the gay relationships portrayed in her novel. The following narrative passage in which Martha Divine comments on Leocadio's relationship with Migueles is a good example: "El más grande, la más Chiquita. Uno hombre, el otro mujer, aunque puede ser el más chico, que no necesariamente sea un hombre el más fuerte ni el más grande que el otro, sino el que dirige, el que decide, el que manda. Hay muchas maneras de mandar, muchas formas de ser hombre o ser mujer..." (258). Thus, the author indirectly criticizes the passive role assigned to women in patriarchal society through her homosexual characters, by calling the passive partner the "female" of the gay relationship.

This focus on feminine versus masculine identity coincides with Richard Ellis' commentary about the impossibility of applying the gay/lesbian approach to Latin American texts. According to Ellis, this approach:

Tends to operate within a gay/straight binary opposition, in which the homosexual has been suppressed by the heterosexual. Yet in a number of Latino and Hispanic texts, the over determining sexual binary is not gay/straight but feminine/masculine. Reinaldo Arenas,

for example sees the “gay” male as inherently feminine and rejects the Anglo-American equation of orientation with identity as ill-conceived and unauthentic” (4-5).

In other words, many Latin American texts do assert an identity for gays, but this identity is not the one posited by gay/lesbian studies as the opposition homosexual versus heterosexual. Instead, the dichotomy feminine/masculine tends to pervade much of Latin American fiction.

Other scholars who have studied the phenomenon of transvestism note the connection between cross-dressing and feminism. According to Bullough, Holly Devor in her book *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*, sees gender-blending as “a rebellion against the patriarchy” and “a transitional step between the present patriarchal society and some future, better society” (Bullough 306). Similarly, Ivonne Cuadra emphasizes the role of both the *bolero* and transvestism in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* as elements that “destabilize the traditional dichotomy of sexual genders” (Cuadra 153). Cuadra applies Marjorie Garber’s concept of a “third term” implicit in transvestism to the novel *Sirena Selena* (Cuadra 162). Garber views cross-dressing as a means of creating a “category crisis” because it leads to:

A failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another... The binarism male/female... is itself put in question or under erasure in transvestism,... What this book insists upon, ...is... that transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture: the disruptive element that intervenes, not just a category crisis of male and female but the crisis of category itself (Garber 17).

The application of Garber’s ideas to *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* emphasizes the text’s deconstructive powers and aligns it with the destabilizing approach of queer theory. The blurring of distinction between men and women challenges traditional identities and emphasizes the inability of fixing identity in general.

Santos-Febres’ focus on transvestism in *Sirena Selena* thus suggests to some degree a criticism of contemporary male/female stereotypes and traditional gender roles through the nonverbal symbolism of dress. Hence, it might also be said that this is another point of convergence in the novel between lesbian, queer, and feminist theories,

all of which question such stereotypes and traditional categorizations.

Another analogy between women and gays can be found in their use of patriarchal language. As I pointed out in the introduction, women ironically and parodically appropriate male-dominated language to infuse it with their own meanings. Similarly, Judith Butler indicates that there are:

Discourses within gay and lesbian culture that proliferate specifically gay sexual identities by appropriating and redeploying the categories of sex. The terms queens, butches, femmes and even the parodical reappropriation of dykes, queer and fag redeploy and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity (Butler, 156).

In *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, gay and transvestite characters repeatedly refer to themselves as queers and drag queens in an attempt to strip these terms of their meaning in patriarchal discourse and attribute new significance to them.

In conclusion, Mayra Santos-Febres stories and the novel *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* oscillate between the construction and deconstruction of the notion of identity. Whereas critics such as Irene Cuadra stress the destabilizing power of the musical form of the *bolero* (which is usually associated with heterosexual rather than homosexual love), as well as the ambiguity of transvestism to challenge gender categories (Cuadra 155-158), I have sought to emphasize here how transvestism is also linked to the visual/erotic/mirror image as the nonverbal element which serves as a subversive signifier for marginalized groups who wish to challenge patriarchal ideology and construct their own identities.

In this process of identity construction and deconstruction, some of Santos Febres' texts, such as "Nightstand," "Dilcia M.," and "Hebra rota," posit inauthentic, alienated identities through the use of the erotic/visual/mirror image, whereas others, such as "Espejo con salmuera," and "Pez de vidrio," suggest the realization of a genuine identity through the same technique. These last two stories evoke bell hooks' description of black lesbian sexuality in the film *Passion of Remembrance*:

In one playfully erotic scene, two young black women, a lesbian couple, get dressed to go out. As part of their celebratory preparations they dance together, painting their lips, looking at their images in the

mirror, exulting in their black female bodies... Their pleasure, the film suggests, emerges in a decolonized erotic context rooted in commitments to feminist and anti-racist politics. When they look in the mirror and focus on specific body parts (their full thick lips and buttocks), the gaze is one of recognition. We see their pleasure and delight in themselves (76).

Santos-Febres' descriptions of the delight in the erotic self through the mirror image in "Espejo con salmuera" and "Pez de vidrio" represent an attempt to enact what bell hooks describes as an authentic black female identity and sexuality achieved through self-recognition in the mirror. Not all of Santos-Febres' characters are successful in this endeavor. As we have seen, the protagonists of stories such as "Nightstand," "Dilcia M." and "Hebra rota" do not delight in their images or use them to achieve a passionate, joyous sexuality and sense of self. Similarly, the transvestite characters of *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* employ the mirror image less as a source of delight and identification, and more as a tool for deconstruction of traditional notions of identity. Only the lesbian characters in "Pez de vidrio" and "Espejo con salmuera" succeed in an authentic identity construction through the visual/mirror image. Nonetheless, all of these texts share the use of the visual/mirror image as a tool for identity construction or destabilization. It is through the viewing of the self and/or visual markers that the author posits the ultimate ability or lack thereof to construct or deconstruct an identity.

Helene C. Weldt-Basson
Michigan State University

WORKS CITED

- Agosín, Marjorie. *Las hacedoras: Mujer, imagen, escritura*. Santiago: Cuarto Propio, 1993.
- Alós, Anselmo Peres, and Andrea Cristiane Kahmann. "La ruptura con el continuum sexo-género-deseo: algunos apuntes acerca de la obra *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*, de Mayra Santos-Febres." *Espéculo* 29 (2005): n.p.

- Ardener, Shirley, ed. *Perceiving Women*. London: Malaby Press, 1975.
- Birmingham-Pokorny, Elba D. "Reclaiming the Female Body, Culture, and Identity in Mayra Santos-Febre's 'Broken Strand.'" *Daughters of the Diaspora: Afro-Hispanic Writer*. Ed. Miriam DeCosta-Willis. Jamaica: Randle, Kingston, 2003. 462-468.
- Bullough, Vern L. and Bonnie Bullough. *Cross Dressing, Sex, and Gender*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Castillo, Debra. *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992.
- Cixous, Hélène. *Writing the Feminine*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984.
- Cuadra, Ivonne. "Quién canta? Bolero y ambigüedad genérica en *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* de Mayra Santos Febres."
- Devor, Holly. *Gender Blending: Confronting the Limits of Duality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
- Ellis, Robert Richmond. "Introduction." *Reading and Writing the Ambiente: Queer Sexualities in Latino, Latin American, and Spanish Culture*. Eds. Susana Chávez-Silverman and Librada Hernández. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2000. 3-18.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Harper Collins, 1992.
- Greenberg, Nina Manasan. "Defining Differences: Feminism, Race Theory, and Identity Politics in the Academy." *Women of Color: Defining the Issues, Hearing the Voices*. Eds. Diane Long Hoeveler and Janet K. Boles. Westport (Connecticut): Greenwood Press, 2001.
- Guerra-Cunningham, Lucía. "Las sombras de la escritura: Hacia una teoría de la producción literaria de la mujer latinoamericana." *Cultural and Historical Grounding for Hispanic and Luso-Brazilian Feminist Literary Criticism*. Ed. Hernán Vidal. Vol. 4 Literature and Human Rights. Minneapolis: Institute for the Study of Ideologies and Literature, 1989. 129-164.
- Hammonds, Evelyn. "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. Eds. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997. 136-156.
- hooks, bell. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Cambridge: South End Press, 1992.

- Irigaray, Luce. *This Sex Which is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter and Caroly Burke. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.
- Jiménez, Rubén Rodríguez. "Escritura transexual y borrón de identidad en *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*." *Ciberletras: Revista de crítica literaria y de cultura* 9 (2003): n.p.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Revolution in Poetic Language*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1984.
- Lorde, Audre. "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993. 339-343.
- Ludmer, Josefina. "Tretas del débil." *La sartén por el mango: Encuentro de escritoras latinoamericanas*. Eds. Patricia Elena González and Eliana Ortega. Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1985. 47-54.
- Morgado, Marcia. "Literatura para curar el asma". <www.Barcelonareview.com/17/s_ent_msf.htm>. 1-6.
- Pérez, Carmen. "'Marina y su olor' y 'Hebra rota': Lo maravilloso y lo mítico." *Exégesis* 15.43: 59-64.
- Santos Febres, Mayra. *El cuerpo correcto*. San Juan: R y R Editoras, 1998.
- _____. *Pez de vidrio*. Río Piedras: Ediciones Huracán, 1996.
- _____. *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*. Barcelona: Mondadori, 2000.
- Spender, Dale. *Man-Made Language*. London: Pandora, 1980.
- Tannen, Deborah. *Gender & Discourse*. London: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- _____. *Talking Voices: Repetition, Dialogue, and Imagery in Conversational Discourse*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Weldt-Basson, Helene Carol. *Subversive Silences: Nonverbal Expression and Implicit Narrative Strategies in the Works of Latin American Women Writers*. Madison (New Jersey): Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009.