

Getting to the Colonial Status through Sexuality: Lessons on Puerto Rico's Political Predicament from Women Writers

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ABSTRACT

This essay uses a fusion of queer and Puerto Rican studies, and a small sample of literature by Puerto Rican women writers, to initiate a conversation about representations of colonized subject positions through articulations of sexuality and non-conforming expressions of gender in contemporary Puerto Rican literature. The two writers whose works I discuss, Ana Lydia Vega and Mayra Santos-Febres, are unarguably part of the Puerto Rican literary canon, which is characterized by the highly political content of its narratives. Using authors that are generally understood to be straight to talk about queerness and anti-coloniality provides a unique perspective, for it shows women from a colony utilizing non-dominant sexualities and gender identities strategically to both articulate and subvert power. That is to say, they are using queer sexualities and gender identities within their narrative serves as powerful analogies to myriad themes, in this particular case to the theme of colonialism. [Keywords: Ana Lydia Vega, Mayra Santos-Febres, political queerness, sexuality, colonialism, women writers]

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[C]anon formation constitutes a highly politicized process; while trying to mirror the nation, the canon reveals the internal fractures that undermine its own ideal of unification. For this reason, examining a particular canon, as well as the silences created by those texts omitted from it, can reveal much about a particular culture/nation at any given historical juncture.

—MARISEL MORENO (2012, 16)

[El colonizado, la víctima y los marginados] existen porque existe el otro: el colonizador, el victimario, el explotador... (The colonized, the victim, and the marginalized exist because the other exists: the colonizer, the victimizer, the exploiter).

—JUAN ANGEL SILÉN (1996, 171)

In this essay, I would like to initiate a conversation about representations of colonized subject positions through articulations of sexuality and non-conforming expressions of gender in contemporary Puerto Rican literature. I will use a fusion of queer and Puerto Rican studies and a small sample of literature by Puerto Rican women writers to open this necessary conversation.

I begin by invoking Puerto Rico's political status as a territory of the U.S. and Frances Negrón-Muntaner's claim that Puerto Rico is one of the most "politically queer places" on earth (Negrón-Muntaner 2007, 1). Analyzing Puerto Ricans' apparent inability to decide on a political status, Negrón-Muntaner deftly invokes and deploys W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness." As she tells us, Puerto Ricans, like other subordinated groups, are "always looking at [themselves] through the eyes of others, measuring [their] soul[s] by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Negrón-Muntaner 2007, 4). She speaks of a Puerto Rican way of life that is imagined (by Puerto Ricans) "to be slightly better than that of a full-fledged US citizen, with all her rights and financial perks, and miles away from independence" (Negrón-Muntaner 2007, 6). Later in this essay I will refer to the performance of this imagined life that includes US citizenship and that is miles away from independence as "Global North drag," that is, as a performance that portrays Puerto Rico as a bona fide part of the Global North. It is the juxtaposition of looking at themselves as others see them (perhaps as nothing more than colonial subjects) while enjoying some of the perks of U.S. citizenship (without having to commit the island to either statehood or independence) that creates this Puerto Rican-specific double consciousness.

The double consciousness employed by Puerto Ricans has allowed them to ignore/brush off/justify the colonial status of the island for so long, or as Negrón-Muntaner explains, to ignore the pornography of colonialism by privileging the political ambiguity (which becomes the basis for the political queerness) of Puerto Rico's status. She cites Efrén Rivera-Ramos, who contends that "Puerto Ricans are imperfectly-produced colonial subjects in and through legal discourse" (Negrón-Muntaner

2007, 6). The production of the colonial subject through legal discourse that Rivera-Ramos references includes decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court, which during the first half of the 20th century determined that “Puerto Rico belongs to but it is not part of the United States” (Burnett and Marshall 2001, 1). It also includes Congress, the actual entity in charge of governing Puerto Rico, which, following the stipulations of the territorial clause in the U.S. Constitution (Article 4, Section 3, Clause 2)¹, has made all sorts of determinations, including granting a limited kind of U.S. citizenship to Puerto Ricans in 1917.²

This imperfectly produced colonial subject and metropolitan citizen is, then, bound to feel at home with ambiguity, with subordinated forms of existence, and with political queerness, to use Negrón-Muntaner’s concept. As she expounds, Puerto Rico’s political queerness “endures not because people are indifferent to its limitations, but because it allows a wide range of individual and group identifications to co-exist without completely spoiling each other” (Negrón-Muntaner 2007, 10). Puerto Ricans are tied to a particular geographical area that is sometimes recognized as a country, but never as a nation state. Yet Puerto Ricans can be seen as a cultural nation. Rubén Ríos Ávila also refers to Puerto Rico as a queer nation.³ Puerto Ricans are definitely not indifferent to the limitations imposed by these contradictions pointing to its complicated status. One only has to read the work of any writer, read the local newspapers, and listen to local discussions to understand that, if anything, Puerto Ricans are hyper aware of the limitations endured by the island’s political status.

It also becomes apparent that Puerto Ricans are, in pertinent cases, in general agreement politically. In fact, if we examine Puerto Rican political behavior in relation to subjects other than the political status of the island, we will see that in some cases they can be quite united in their views. For instance, a 2016 poll by the Center for American Progress Action Fund found that Puerto Ricans in Florida were overwhelmingly supportive of Hillary Clinton’s candidacy for the Presidency of the U.S., with 70 percent of island-born Puerto Ricans living in that state having a favorable view of the Democratic candidate (Center for American Progress Action Fund 2016). Similarly, a few years earlier and as the new millennium dawned, Puerto Ricans engaged in public and international demonstrations against the presence and actions of the U.S. Navy in Vieques, Puerto Rico, and at some point 68 percent of voters on the island favored the exit of the U.S. military from the tiny municipality (González 2001).

Queerness is about asserting and embracing ways of being and behaving that are deemed deviant by mainstream ideologies. When it comes to the island’s political status, Puerto Ricans seem to have embraced (or at the very least come to terms with) its deviance as a political entity: the deviance of not being a recognized nation state or not being fully embedded within a powerful nation state (i.e., the U.S.), although that nation-state still has the right to stake a claim to it (i.e., Puerto Rico). Its political aberration is a fundamental part of its queerness. Of course, queerness is also about flux, about changes, about movement while fighting a seeming ideologi-

cal permanence. To borrow Noreen Giffney's idea, queerness is "a site of permanent becoming" (2004). This idea relates to Edouard Glissant's (2010) notion of the poetics of relation, "in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other" (11), so that the identity and the other are constantly defining each other. Queerness, which is always straddling the line between crushing "static" ideologies and "dynamic" forms of resistance, also seeks to be(come) something other than what it is told it is. Giffney's incisive definition is also the perfect juxtaposition for Puerto Rico, an island in a permanent state of becoming a territory, a country, a state, anything but what it has been told it is.

To truly understand Puerto Rico's political queerness, we must situate such queerness within its context, that of a subordinated political entity that is affected by the dominant ideologies of the Metropolis, and given the hyper-connected times we find ourselves in, affected by dominant global ideologies as well. Let us take as an example of dominant global ideologies, those involving commodification, that is, ideologies that seek to turn every manifestation of human life into a commodity. This include human manifestations involving sexuality and gender identity/(re)presentation, our main topic here. As Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan tell us:

In a world where what used to be considered the 'private' is ever more commodified and marketed, queerness has become both an object of consumption... and an object through which queers constitute their identities in our contemporary consumer-oriented globalized world. (2002, 1)

We must also be mindful of the impact of dominant ideologies that articulate queerness as existing outside of norms and those that facilitate the consumption of queer bodies, especially queer bodies who are also colonial subjects. One example of such impacts is migration and diasporic formations as shaped by what Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes has identified as a kind of "self-exile" based on non-dominant sexualities.⁴ La Fountain-Stokes maintains that sexuality (and more specifically homosexuality) has seldom been acknowledged as a causal factor or a motivation for migration. He further argues that migration scholars have "ignored the question of non-hegemonic sexualities" when discussing migration patterns (La Fountain-Stokes 2009, xix). He identifies an important connection between non-hegemonic sexuality and migration by categorically telling us that "[s]exuality is a key factor in shaping and defining Puerto Rican migration to the United States," adding that when it comes to migration, sexuality "is as relevant as economic, political, and social factors" (La Fountain-Stokes 2009, ix).⁵ This movement of bodies from one (less welcoming) space to another also impacts the way those bodies are commodified.

Migrating and migration patterns are important for Puerto Ricans on the island,⁶ as at this point there are more Puerto Ricans living outside of Puerto Rico than on the island. In fact, and going back to La Fountain-Stokes point, according to the U.S. Census, there were about 48,000 LGB-identified individuals living in Puerto Rico (Romero et.al., 2008) in 2005, while according to an estimate derived from a Gallup Poll, about 189,000 gay-identified Puerto Ricans lived on the mainland in 2012 (Crary 2012).⁷ Thus, although we can't make categorical statements about "self-exile," we can still note that while the U.S. has about 25 percent more Puerto Ricans than Puerto Rico, it possibly has 75 percent more LGB-identified Puerto Ricans than Puerto Rico, supporting La Fountain-Stokes point.

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Globalization, as identified by Cruz-Malavé and Malanansan in relation to queer marketing, is also important because it promotes ideas about commodification and consumption. As part of the U.S. and as part of a territory that is allowed access to the world through the colonial lens, different forms of commodification (of peoples, cultures, etc.), and ideas about consumption are constantly introduced to Puerto Ricans through U.S. media and popular culture, travel, and education abroad. In 2013, the household consumption percentage in Puerto Rico was a monstrous 84 percent of the GDP (Rivera 2016). For comparison purposes, in 2014, the household consumption percentage in the U.S. was 59 percent. In 2013, the GDP per capita income in Puerto Rico was a little over \$25,900 (Trading Economics 2017), while that of the U.S. was \$52,700 (The World Bank 2016). The state of Mississippi had the lowest GDP per capita in the U.S. with a little over \$32,400 (Bureau of Economic Analysis 2014), 22 percent higher than that of the island. Consumption and queer consumption tap into issues of homonormativity as described by Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel. As the author states,

I adopt [Lisa] Duggan's term [of homonormativity], but I use it to refer to the institutionalization of a hegemonic gay identity that can turn into a posture as exclusive and oppressive as heteronormative practices. A result from this institutionalization is that sexual liberty is replaced by an anxiety to define and make visible a public gay identity that ignores or even condemns those who challenge monogamy or those who feel excluded by a binary gender system. (2008, 1040—author's translation)⁸

Martínez-San Miguel's point is an important one, because the narratives that make visibility possible are as important as visibility itself. The remainder of this essay seeks to discuss the visibility of queer identities and how that visibility has been taken up in the narratives of two Puerto Rican authors.⁹

The Role of Literature

In the coming together of queerness and colonialism in this paper, I am seeking to explain how queerness can become a tool to oppose or challenge colonialism, but also, how queerness can become an allegory for the island's political status. Of course, opposition and challenges to, and allegories of, colonialism can take many forms and manifest in different ways, I am using literature here, for I agree with María Solá, who argued that “[a]ny narrative reflects the society in which it was created [but] even more valuable, it reveals what is hidden or disguised” (1990, 21). This is particularly so among writers in a colony. And even more pertinent among women writers in a colony who are taking steps to make sexuality and non-confirming forms of gender representation visible.

It was Solá who, rightly, also claimed that, near the end of the 20th century, “same sex love is hardly discussed in any kind of open or detailed way among female writers” (1990, 42). Although true at the time, the engagement of Puerto Rican writers, both in Puerto Rico and the diaspora, with “same-sex love” particularly and queerness more generally has changed considerably in the last three decades since she wrote that statement when writers have taken head-on and openly discussions of sexuality (see, for instance, the anthology *Los otros cuerpos*, edited by Moisés Agosto-Rosario, Luis Negrón, and David Caleb Acevedo (2007); and Luz María Umpierre's memoir, *I'm Still Standing* (2011), among others). I would like to note that although some of the themes I will discuss here are present in the works of male Puerto Rican writers, I have made a conscious decision to use the works of women because women experience a colonialism that is compounded by patriarchal ideologies, which, as Diana Vélez tells us, create an “untenable social position” for women (Vélez 1997, xvi). I argue that writing from such an “untenable position” involving colonialism and patriarchy provides a unique perspective on sexuality, gender representation, and coloniality. Also, I am only using two texts by two women writers (Ana Lydia Vega and Mayra Santos-Febres) with the understanding that they are obviously not inclusive, but that they are definitely representative of island-based Puerto Rican women works and writers, respectively, as Vega and Santos-Febres are two of the most read and most studied contemporary Puerto Rican authors.

I would like to move into a discussion of literature, queerness, and colonialism by engaging the scholar Juana María Rodríguez, who presents us with a solid analysis involving the relationship between the Puerto Rican nation and sexuality, or as she so eloquently puts it, “getting fucked in Puerto Rico.” She explains that Puerto Ricans “see the figure of the homosexual as a symbol for that which is—or should be—outside the configuration of nation” (2007, 133), that is, that Puerto Ricans see homosexuality as deviant. However, she acknowledges that shifts in ideology are tak-

ing place, and uses recent victories by queer activist groups in gaining certain recognitions and protections by the state to talk about those shifts in ideology. She finishes her essay with the following words:

For now, it seems that Puerto Rico's sodomites, its queers, those abject bodies that the state and its political parties had once sought to define themselves against, have momentarily succeeded in penetrating the contours of the nation, a public triumph that validates queer claims to the joyous narration of national self-affirmation as it makes unequivocal broader civic demands for sexual, social, and political sovereignty, a sovereignty that is always already circumscribed by other circuits of power, pleasure, and control. (2007, 139)

It is that relationship between sexuality and other circuits of power and control, and how they are portrayed and challenged by the literature of Puerto Rican women writers during the twilight of the 20th century and the dawn of the 21st century to which I turn my attention.

Mainly, I would like to focus on how Puerto Rican women writers use sexual and/or gender minority subjects/characters to discuss the political situation on the island: the way these authors use Puerto Rico's brand of queerness, that is, a queerness that involves both those exiled and those who remain on the island—the ones exiled *in situ*, the ones that also, without a doubt, are affected by migration (that is, by those who left), globalization (that is, by imported ideas about commodification and consumption), and heteronormative practices (that is, by ideologies about how gayness and queerness should be performed, as discussed by Martínez-San Miguel above). More specifically, I would like to propose a particular way of interpreting these works: these writers are using notions about the lives of queer subjects to indict the U.S. colony of Puerto Rico. The authors use their imaginations to depict the island's sexual and gender minorities, who in addition to their already precarious positioning as sexual minorities, must also, as all other Puerto Ricans, deal with the piercing force of the colonial state creating allegorical representations of the political positioning (or status) of the island and the social positioning of the sexual/gender minority subject.

Mainly, I am arguing that, regardless of their own backgrounds in relation to sexuality and gender, women writers have begun to incorporate non-dominant sexualities and gender representations into their literary works, as a way of addressing and speaking against certain aspects of the political positionality of Puerto Rico/Puerto Ricans.

As Diana Vélez asserts, through the work of contemporary women writers: “We’re looking at contemporary Puerto Rico, post-Operation Bootstrap Puerto Rico,

industrialized though still colonized, complete with Burger Kings and Kentucky Fried Chickens” (2007, iii). This context is important as contemporary Puerto Rico also comes with a massive brain drain (Gillespie 2015) and the uncertainty of an unpayable debt (Walsh and Moyer 2016).

By discussing two particular works by two women writers, I am interested in representations of the queer subject and responses to the colonial state. Or perhaps more to the point, representations of the queer subject *as* responses to the colonial state (i.e., the queer subject as a metaphor for the colonial state). Specifically, I would like to motivate a discussion about the use of non-dominant sexualities and non-conforming gender representations and/as connections to anti-colonialist ideas and tactics by Puerto Rican women writers. Mainly, I am arguing that, regardless of their own backgrounds in relation to sexuality and gender, women writers have begun to incorporate non-dominant sexualities and gender representations into their literary works, as a way of addressing and speaking against certain aspects of the political positionality of Puerto Rico/Puerto Ricans. As literary and cultural documentarians, Puerto Rican women writers create works that directly contest coloniality,¹⁰ but also works in which the queer Puerto Rican subject is able to transcend the limitations of the colonial state. As Rubén Ríos Ávila points out: “In Puerto Rico, literature has been usually at the service of national identity, a claim made more urgent by what has been perceived as the unresolved political status of two successive stages of colonialism” (1998, 102). These two stages of colonialism have forced Puerto Ricans to find unorthodox tools for doing anti-colonialism. And, in the narratives of women writers, sexuality and gender representation have become such a tool. The two writers whose works I discuss here, Ana Lydia Vega and Mayra Santos-Febres, are also unarguably part of the Puerto Rican literary canon; and, as Moreno tells us in the opening epigraph, “Canon formation constitutes highly politicized process” (2012, 16). Part of that politicized process is the political content of the narratives themselves.

Gayness as an Anti-Colonial Vegetable¹¹

I would like to begin with Ana Lydia Vega’s literary essay “Vegetal fiero y tierno” (Fierce and Tender Vegetable) found in the edited collection *El tramo ancla*.¹² Vega’s essay is written in a humorous tone, following her own conviction, as she conveys in her interview with Marie Panico that: “The objective of literature is not [...] to give solutions, but to make people reflect on issues, while entertaining them” (1987, 44—author’s translation). The essay was published 27 years ago, and in it she articulates a Puerto Ricanness that emerges from a specific dialectic involving her family’s effort to shore up its boundaries by juxtaposing it against Americanness. Vega unravels this dialectic while talking about her own experience as a vegetarian on the island. Faced with her extended family members’ skepticism of vegetarianism and vegetarians, she is subjected to comments imputing vegetarianism as an American influence, just “like feminism,”¹³ at family gatherings. Those “innocent” comments are a sure way of

positioning her, a non-meat-eating (and therefore suspect) Puerto Rican, in opposition to the meat eating (and therefore *bona fide*) Puerto Ricans. Vega, of course, is fully aware of her family's message: she is slacking in her Puerto Ricanness, for she is vegetarian and she also identifies as a feminist. Moreover, she is being more like the colonizer, a charge a little too hard to swallow for a woman who has shown disdain toward Puerto Rico's colonial status.

Vega then takes the discussion of positionality further by asking her readers the following: "[j]ust imagine the psychological mega-trauma of a Jewish, black, homosexual, pro-independence, communist, feminist, Puerto Rican, woman, who is also a vegetarian" (1991, 270).¹⁴ Her wording insinuates that the positionality of the subject becomes more complicated with each added category, which leads her to taunt the reader by concluding "that is not my case, mind you, but you must admit that 6 out of 9 is not a bad average to get me started"¹⁵ (Vega 1991, 270), playfully leaving the reader to choose which five additional categories of that megapositionality actually apply to her.

Her essay is written in a humorous tone, and the humor of that passage is not lost. As María Solá states: "In [Vega's] literary universe, everybody and everything is a laughing matter... But the mockery comes from a kindred spirit, and not in a cynical or pedantic manner; so that her texts laugh with us and with their characters, as well as at the characters, at the readers and even at literature's lofty image" (1994, 6). However, the seriousness of Vega's statement is uncovered in its opening phrase: "Just imagine." The fact that she has to ask the reader to "just imagine" the scenario, speaks of how inconceivable (and perhaps unlikely), or at the very least how rare such a mix of multiple sources of "un-Puerto Ricanness" might be. But, it is precisely the directive embedded in the phrase "just imagine" that serves as an exercise in anti-colonialism. By imagining something, that is, by picturing it in our minds, we make it come to existence, we make it a possibility: in this case, a possibility that envisions a Puerto Rican existing as an amalgam of subordinated positions, most of which are in direct opposition to dominant discourses and ideologies in both the colony and the metropolis.

The fact that sexuality,—and more specifically, homosexuality—is listed alongside a pro-independence stance, feminism, and even communism, reveals that just like other political and social identities, (homo)sexuality is also a means of struggle against and opposition to dominant ideologies. The paradox that these categories are also seen as belonging to the metropolis (by her family) is the most important aspect of the essay, for in the end, the author is deploying them against both the subjects of the colony and those of the metropolis. The combination of a Jewish, black, homosexual, pro-independence, communist, feminist, vegetarian woman is as threatening to the U.S. ideological order as it is to Puerto Rico's. Thus, by challenging ideologies in both the colony and the metropolis, sexuality transcends (and the other categories transcend) the cultural, social, and political limitations imposed by both. This takes us back to Puerto Rico's queerness, which then becomes a productive political endeavor where its ambiguity, resistance, and deviance lead

to non-conformity and to the challenging of dominant ideas of nationality coming from both the U.S. and Puerto Rico. The interesting thing about Vega's discussion of her experience as a vegetarian woman in Puerto Rico and the other sources of "otherness" that she positions in her piece is that a decade and a half later, Puerto Rico began to see a movement where socially and environmentally conscious local growers began to push organic and vegetarian diets. Among them is lesbian Tara Rodríguez Besosa, who runs a farm-to-table organic and vegetarian restaurant and grocery market called *El Departamento de la Comida* (Ferber 2017). As a woman who is a lesbian and a vegetarian, Rodríguez-Besosa embodies a number of the "othered" positionalities discussed by Vega in her essay, she then becomes a living embodiment of Vega's "just imagine..."

Coloniality as Transnational Drag

In an interview, with Teresa Peña-Jordán, Mayra Santos-Febres expounds that as a writer she is very interested "in the limits of language, and the ways in which language tries to visit, without colonizing, non-linguistic spaces"¹⁶ (2003, 119). And she continues: "I come from a culture where language is parody; where language is carnival; where language is always elusive, because it's trying to convey meaning between two colonial languages, English and Spanish"¹⁷ (Peña-Jordán 2003, 119). It is that positioning between spaces (part of the double consciousness that Negrón Muntaner describes above) that drives the characters of her first novel *Sirena Selena*,¹⁸ which tells the story of an effeminate 15-year-old boy with an exquisite voice. The boy performs the sorrowful genre bolero in drag, and goes by the stage name Sirena Selena.¹⁹ Sirena has a mentor/manager named Martha, a transgender woman, whom Sirena calls mom. Calling Martha mom, of course, is the result of alternative families within queer communities, where individuals must create these families to, as Santos-Febres argues, "be able to survive destitution and social maltreatment" (Peña-Jordán 2003, 122).²⁰

Santos-Febres conveys that, in the novel, the characters use sexuality and gender representation as negotiating tools, and means of survival. With her performance and her voice, Sirena sells desire, and Martha, with her business acumen, sells Sirena. Equally important, Sirena's character, who is symbolically up in the air in a flight from Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic at the beginning of the novel, has the illusion of getting to New York. It is through this transnationality (involving the colony, a nation state, and a metropolitan city) that the novel and the author give agency to the colonized queer subject.

According to Alberto Sandoval-Sánchez, "Santos captures the transnational and transglobal dynamics of the Caribbean," for Sirena Selena can be seen as an allegory of Puerto Rico, where the island's "historical condition is an act of transvestism that converts the island and its subjects into a (neo)colonial (transvestive) nation" (2003, 10).²¹ Although it is not clear whether Selena is transgender or a drag performer (I would definitely not call her transvestite, as Sandoval-Sánchez does), I would argue that

Sirena Selena's singing performance can be seen as an allegory for Puerto Rico's "Global North" performance since 1952.²² Of course, after both man-made and natural disasters in recent times,²³ Puerto Rico can no longer perform as part of the Global North. That is, after its economy collapsed in 2016, and after its precarious infrastructure succumbed to a hurricane a year later, Puerto Rico is no longer able to offer itself as a model of development. It is worth noting, however, that when Santos-Febres wrote her novel, Puerto Rico was still dedicated to such a model.

Sirena Selena, the character, becomes a literary embodiment of both issues raised by Negrón-Muntaner about Puerto Rico being the queerest place of them all that uses a double consciousness to address its own contradictions and limitations, in many cases through spectacle. Sandoval-Sánchez further argues that Puerto Rico's status "produces new economic dependencies as well as new strategies of survival," and "within these circumstances, presupposing the failed colonial apparatus that is Puerto Rico, national identity is circumscribed to the parameters of simulacrum and spectacle, which ironically accommodate the possibility of agency and decolonization as allegorized in Sirena Selena's own [drag performance]" (Sandoval-Sánchez 2003, 18). Going back to Rodríguez's point above involving "the joyous narration of national self-affirmation," as a character, Sirena Selena is making an "unequivocal broader civic demand," one that involves "sexual, social, and political sovereignty."

But if drag performance is an allegory for decolonization, then only through a complete transformation can Puerto Rico become something other than a colony, because that's what drag performances require: a complete and utter alteration of the "current condition" of the subject (even if that transformation is merely illusory and momentary, and even if it is by way of spectacle).

We learn at the end of the novel that when Selena sings, she is actually declaring that "[s]he deserves a better life than the one she has" (Santos-Febres 2002, 205). But if drag performance is an allegory for decolonization, then only through a complete transformation can Puerto Rico become something other than a colony, because that's what drag performances require: a complete and utter alteration of the "current condition" of the subject (even if that transformation is merely illusory and momentary, and even if it is by way of spectacle). What is startling about this allegory is that in the novel, at the end, Sirena Selena simply disappears headed to the capital in a taxi cab "carrying a large bag and a small case" (2002, 207). She left no explanation and nobody knows where she went or why. Thus, if we are to follow the allegory to the end, Sirena's transformation, and by extension that of Puerto Rico, is unfinished, and perhaps more troubling, is unknown. The fact that Sirena

fantasizes with making it to New York while she's headed to the Dominican Republic also suggests that the performative aspect of Puerto Rico's status can only be engaged (and perhaps changed) through the world "outside" it. This suggests that Puerto Rico's drag performance as a model of development is (or was) a "transnational drag" performance, one that is done in/for spaces outside the nation.

Santos-Febres concludes the novel with a monologue. We as reader do not know who exactly is the person talking to us (it could be Martha or Sirena Selena—in a not so distant future—or one of Martha's other girls). All we know is that the person is about to perform. The last lines of the monologue go like this:

You have to remain positive. Even though you feel like a dirty rag because life is tearing your heart apart. Even though the police grab you coming out of a club for being a maricón and your husband takes off with somebody else. Even though you live in a tiny room filled with cockroaches, and moths are eating the dresses you've sewn so painstakingly in order to enjoy an instant of luxury in this horrid bar. Just keep on looking for your lucky star. It's up there, shining in the firmament, holding a future of luxury and happiness for you. That's why I want to sing you this positive, playful song, to give us the courage to catch our lucky stars. I can already see mine, just beyond my grasp. I can almost reach it. I swear, there are days when I believe I can touch it with my fingertips. (2002, 214)

The monologue is heart wrenching in its openness and frankness. It is also horrific in its optimism and positivity. The performer is talking about her life, about her existence, but she is also talking about everyone's life and existence, including Puerto Rico's. That is why the second person narrative here—"you" have to remain positive—becomes the most heart-breaking part.

Santos-Febres tells us that Sirena Selena "is a story about negotiations. ¿What is being negotiated? How do you escape poverty, coming from nothing? ¿How do you access dignity?"²⁴ (Peña-Jordán 2003, 121). In the Sirena-Puerto Rico allegory, negotiating positionality by way of "performing" something beyond the expectations of their sex assigned at birth and political status respectively while accessing dignity are key. That is to say, with their performances, both Sirena Selena and Puerto Rico are negotiating not just their identities, but also their economic realities.

Bringing Vegetables and Drag Together

As I argued above, in her essay "Vegetal fiero y tierno," Ana Lydia Vega is using identity makers and categories against dominant ideologies firmly in place both in the colony and in the metropolis. The identity categories she chooses to use (ethnicity/religion—Jewish, race—Black, sexuality—gay, political affiliation—pro-independence, political ideology—communist, feminism—feminist, eating preferences—vegetarian, and gender—woman) present threats to both the U.S. and Puerto Rico's ideological orders. Ironically, it is through the intersection of these ideological forms that (at least in part) the colonial or-

der is perpetuated. I added above that by challenging ideologies in both the colony and the metropolis, sexuality becomes a tool to transcend the colonial state. Going back to Negrón-Muntaner's point, sexuality becomes a tool (and the combination of the other categories become tools) for the deployment of double-consciousness. We could also argue that in this exercise the author turns sexuality into a queer endeavor, one criticizing and challenging the status of the island by way of resistance and deviance.

Similarly, in her novel *Sirena Selena*, Mayra Santos-Febres presents us with an allegory of the imperfectly produced colonial subject that Efrén Rivera Ramos posits. It is not because of Selena's drag performances or because of her voice, but because of the poverty from which she is seeking to escape (as explained by Santos-Febres above). Puerto Rico, like *Sirena*, has been performing in drag as a shining example of the developed world, seeking to transcend or escape the colonial state, with poverty as its primarily economic condition. We don't know from the novel what the boy wants to do with his life (whether he sees himself as a woman and would like to affirm her gender through surgery in the future, or whether he is content with "just" dragging) to escape poverty. We also do not know what Puerto Rico/Puerto Ricans will ultimately decide to do with the colonial status.

In the end, both authors give us insight into Puerto Rico's queerness as a "permanent state of becoming." By using sexuality and gender representation these authors explore double consciousness, ambiguity, and deviance, which is to say, they explore and present us with anti-colonial interventions as queerness.

Final Thoughts

In a reflective piece about Puerto Rican writers, Magali García Ramis expounds on the writers of her generation:

The relationship with the most advanced empire in the world brought us a brotherhood with the minorities in North America...and, in imitation of the Black militants, we began to raise our left fist because we were leftists in our estimation, while the leftists of the rest of the world raised their right fist, the one of the battle... We were able to see ourselves from many different perspectives; to feel a brotherhood with a progressive Chile; to cry for Allende and Neruda; to hope again after knowing Benedetti; to cry for the liberation of our five nationalists; to fight to have the navy removed from Vieques and to feel desperate jubilation over the death of Pinochet. Upon seeing ourselves reflected in a thousand neighboring villages from the Caribbean and Central America, to the world of the Andes and from all of America, our differences were no longer. We played one last time before growing up, Rayuela with Cortázar, and once and for all, we sat down to write. (1987, 113)

Although Santos-Febres is younger than Vega and García Ramis (who are the exact same age), it is fair to assume that she was also influenced by both Puerto Rico's connection to the U.S. and its connection to Latin America. We can also assume that she is influenced by a desire to transcend the isolation that comes with living on an island

by connecting Puerto Rico and its subordinated condition to the rest of the world. This explains the value of combining these authors here and highlighting the centrality of anti-colonialist writings by Puerto Rican women.

Although I limit my analysis to a limited number of texts by island-based women writers, these connections are being made by other writers on the island regardless of gender—for example, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, David Caleb Acevedo, and Luis Negrón.

The emerging use of non-dominant sexualities and non-dominant gender representations to advance anti-colonialist sensibilities is important, for it makes necessary connections at and marks the beginning of the 21st century. Although I limit my analysis to a limited number of texts by island-based women writers, these connections are being made by other writers on the island regardless of gender—for example, Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, David Caleb Acevedo, and Luis Negrón. This technique also leads to a thematic re-structuring of the canon, and as Marisel Moreno tells us in the opening epigraph, the silences created by the texts omitted from it. Sexuality as anti-coloniality also taps into issues of representation, for as Ana Lydia Vega conveyed in an interview with Carmen Dolores Hernández:

In Puerto Rico you also have to be a sort of ambassador, always, of a country with no international representation. When abroad, you have to speak for the island, explain the language problem, the immigration problem, explain Puerto Rico's particular political situation. Literature and art in Puerto Rico have to take the place of embassies and consulates. (2000, 55)

As Vega elevates literature to a form of political representation, it is important to keep in mind that the subjects and topics addressed in her literature and that of her contemporaries become visible, real, and perhaps more important, intelligible, not only on the island, but also abroad.

Puerto Rican women writers are excellent at exploring the nuances in different kinds of political articulations for the island, creating poignant metaphors and allegories to Puerto Rico's status and its (im)possibilities. I used the work of these authors to talk about non-dominant sexualities and gender representations, with the understanding that doing so is problematic, for it keeps the old wounds of representation open. However, I would argue that using authors who are not necessarily seen as queer to talk about queerness and anti-coloniality provides a unique perspective for it shows women from a colony utilizing non-dominant sexualities strategically to both articulate and subvert power. That is to say, although these authors are mostly recognized or seen as straight, using queer sexualities within their narrative serves as powerful analogies to myriad themes, in this particular case to the theme of colonialism. Relat-

edly, it is important to understand how members of “dominant groups” recognize and view members of subordinated groups, especially members of dominant groups who are mindful and supportive of members of subordinated groups, qs these writers are.

I would further argue that, through their use of sexuality and gender representation (and the parallels that can be drawn from them), these authors are able to articulate Puerto Rico as a queer entity without calling it such. Going back to Ríos-Ávila’s point about Puerto Rico being a queer nation, he wonders whether “Puerto Rico is a colony with the vocation of a nation, whether it is a queer colony because of its aspirations to be a nation, or whether it is a queer nation with colonial preferences” (2009, 1130).²⁵ It is safe to say that Puerto Rico (that is, the colonial subject and colonial object that is Puerto Rico) has occupied all of these liminal spaces (at times simultaneously). However, it is in the possibility of a “queer nation with colonial preferences” that we see a direct challenge to the normalcy that the positionality of either a sovereign state or a state of the American union may provide for Puerto Rico. Within the festive and elusive language that Santos-Febres describes above, Puerto Rico carves out its own space(s) challenging taken-for-granted ideas about a proper/normal political status. Just like Sirena Selena (the character) presents us with a challenge to a “normal” boy/queen/performer, and just like Vega toys with the notion of a “normal” Puerto Rican in her essay.

To finish, I would like to respond to historian Margot Canaday, who, in documenting the invisibility that is created for sexual minorities within the narratives of the nation-state, asks: “What exactly does it mean to be written out of the nation’s ideas altogether?” (2009, 261). Although the invisibility of minoritized groups within the narratives of the state should be an important discussion for humanists and social scientists alike, equally important is the acknowledgment that minoritized groups, including sexual minorities, are never altogether written out of the nation’s ideas, for we must not reduce the nation’s ideas exclusively to the ideas sponsored and trafficked by the state. These two Puerto Rican women writers remind us that, for better or worse, minoritized groups are always in the collective consciousness of the country, and that includes that of writers. They also remind us that minoritized or subordinated groups are, in addition to defining themselves, also seeking to contest the dominant group(s), to transcend the limits of the discourse that contains and seeks to define them. And, to paraphrase Moreno’s opening epigraph, as part of the Puerto Rican canon these writers “can reveal much about Puerto Rican culture at a very specific historical juncture,” where the colonized is poised to as Silén tells us, exist, and where the colony, following Giffney’s idea, turns into a “site of permanent becoming.”

NOTES

¹ Article 4, Section 3, Clause 2 of the U.S. constitution states the following: “Congress shall have Power to dispose of and make all needful Rules and Regulations respecting the Territory or other Property belonging to the United States; and nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any Claims of the United States, or of any particular State.”

² U.S. citizenship for Puerto Ricans is limited in three fundamental ways: (1) as citizens, Puerto Ricans are not allowed to vote in Presidential elections; (2) they lack Congressional representation (no Senators, no Representatives); and (3) they are not eligible for different federal programs. The first item is important, for it taps into issues of self-determination, insofar as they are bound to U.S. laws, duties, and responsibilities, without enjoying all the accompanying rights. For instance, the President of the U.S., in his capacity as Commander

in Chief, can send Puerto Ricans into War; but yet, they are not allowed to have a say as to who they want as their Commander in Chief. The second point is relevant, for Congress is the entity that actually has power over the island, yet Puerto Ricans are only allowed a Resident Commissioner in Congress, a symbolic position with no vote. Also, although they lack representation in Congress, Puerto Ricans who work for any federal agency are still required to pay income taxes to the Federal government, thus violating the “no taxation without representation” motto that started the American revolution and informed the constitution of Congress and the representation of American citizens in that branch of government. And the third point is important, as it reflects a stark differential when it comes to accessing the benefits of U.S. citizenship.

³ In Ríos-Ávila’s words: El caso de Puerto Rico, un país (aunque la pregunta de si somos país, pueblo, nación o diáspora es ya parte del problema, de lo espinosamente queer del asunto) tan empeñado en asociarse con los atributos culturales que se relacionan con las naciones, a pesar de nunca haberse consolidado políticamente como estado-nación y a pesar de ser una colonia o neo-colonia de Estados Unidos, se deja pensar bastante rápido a través de ciertos matices de lo queer. Puerto Rico es de muchos modos una colonia con vocación de nación, una colonia queer por sus pretensiones nacionales o una nación queer por sus preferencias coloniales.

⁴ Although similar to Manuel Guzmán’s catchy concept of “sexile,” which he defines as “the exile of those who had to leave their nations of origin on account of their” sexualities (1997, 227), I prefer La Fountain-Stokes term, for the “self” component gives the subject agency, while the term sexile seems more descriptive of a condition.

⁵ It is important to note that very little empirical research exists exploring non-economic or non-political reasons for migration.

⁶ According to recent estimates, over 5 million Puerto Ricans live in the America’s fifty states, whereas 3.6 million live in Puerto Rico (López and Patten 2015). Migration, or rather emigration out of the island, has become a contentious topic with social media campaigns such as #YoNoMeQuito (I will not take myself out, or I will not leave), where Puerto Ricans living in Puerto Rico are vowing to remain on the island regardless of circumstances. The campaign has been met with #YoSiMeQuito (I am taking myself out or I am leaving) from those who have left the island or are wanting to leave.

⁷ According to a Gallup Poll, 4 percent of the Hispanic population identified as LGB in 2012 (Crary 2012). According to the Census, the Hispanic population in 2012 was about 52.2 million, and of those about 4.9 million (or 9%) were Puerto Rican (Pew Research Center, 2012). Thus, in numbers, 2.1 million Latinos identify as LGB, and assuming that Puerto Ricans are represented within the LGB numbers at the same rate (that is 9 percent), that puts the LGB Puerto Rican population at approximately 189,000.

⁸ The original quote in Spanish reads: “Adopto el término [heteronormatividad] de [Lisa] Dugan, pero lo uso para referirme a la institucionalización de una identidad gay hegemónica que se puede convertir en una postura tan excluyente y opresiva como los discursos y prácticas heteronormativas. Uno de los resultados de esta institucionalización de lo homonormativo es que el tema de la libertad sexual resulta desplazado por una ansiedad de definir y visibilizar una identidad gay pública que ignora o condena a aquellos que retan el concepto de la monogamia o a quienes se sienten excluidos por un sistema genérico binario.”

⁹ For scholarly pieces about Puerto Rican women writers, see the works of Lourdes Torres (2003), Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes (2009), and Yolanda Martínez-San Miguel (2008), among others.

¹⁰ Walter Mignolo (2011) articulated coloniality as the “darker side of modernity.” For him, modernity wouldn’t exist without coloniality, which he describes as a matrix of power. Anibal Quijano (2000) sees coloniality as legacy power in a contemporary world. Here, I am using the term coloniality in a different way, suggesting a historical continuity, as colonial rule is still in place in Puerto Rico. As such, the essence of that colonial rule carries long-term, almost perennial impacts on a people.

¹¹ A different version of this discussion was published in 2010 in Lugo-Lugo (2010).

¹² Vega’s essay was written in Spanish. I will work with my own translation of passages of the essay, and will provide the original Spanish version in footnotes for reference.

¹³ “¡Gringo, Yanqui, Americuchi como el feminismo! (1991, 273).

¹⁴ “Imagínense el traumón de una mujer, negra, judía, homosexual, puertorriqueña, comunista, feminista y ¡VEGETARIANA!” (1991, 270).

¹⁵ “Que no es mi caso, por siaca...Pero admitan que seis de nueve no es mal promedio para empezar” (1991, 270).

¹⁶ “A mí me interesan mucho como escritora los límites del lenguaje y cómo el lenguaje trata de visitar, no de colonizar, espacios que no son lingüísticos” (1991, 119).

¹⁷ “...vengo de una cultura donde el lenguaje es parodia y donde el lenguaje es carnaval, y donde el lenguaje siempre es elusivo; porque siempre una está tratando de colar sus sentidos entre-medio de dos lenguajes coloniales, que son el español y el inglés” (1991, 119).

¹⁸ I am using the work as translated by Stephen Lytle.

¹⁹ It is important to point out, that although *Sirena Selena* is Santos-Febres’ first novel, the author has addressed different forms of sexualities in her work. For instance, she had addressed prostitution in her second novel *Nuestra señora de la noche* (2006), sadomasochism in *Fe en disfraz* (2009), and lesbianism in “Espejo con salmuera” (a story found in her book of short stories *Pez de vidrio* (1994).

²⁰ Here are Santos Febres’ words in Spanish: “Todas estas familias alternas son otra táctica para poder sobrevivir la destitución y el maltrato social.”

²¹ To be clear, Sirena is not “transvestite” if we go with the official definition of transvestism (usually associated with cross-dressers). Sirena’s performance can be seen, more accurately, as a “drag” performance (by a gay youngster), but regardless of the terminology involving Sirena’s performance, Sandoval-Sánchez point remains: Sirena’s performance can be seen as an allegory of Puerto Rico, where its status becomes a symbolic performance of sorts.

²² When the Commonwealth was institute in 1952, Puerto Rico was dubbed “the shining star of the Caribbean, a model to be emulated by Third World countries around the world (Cabán 2015).

²³ In 2016, Puerto Rico declared bankruptcy. Its finances are now being managed by a commission established by former President Obama. Then, a little over a year later, a Category 4 hurricane leveled the island making it even more vulnerable economically.

²⁴ Sirena es un cuento de negociaciones. ¿Qué se negocia? ¿Cómo se escapa de ser pobre, de ser poca cosa? ¿Cómo se accede a la dignidad?

²⁵ The original text reads as follows: Puerto Rico es de muchos modos una colonia con vocación de nación, una colonia queer por sus pretensiones nacionales o una nación queer por sus preferencias coloniales.

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