



Butler University
Digital Commons @ Butler University

Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2009

A Never Ending Journey: The Impossibilities of Home in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and *Flores de otro mundo*

Irune del Rio Gabiola
Butler University, igabiola@butler.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers

 Part of the [Latin American Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

del Rio Gabiola, I. "A Never Ending Journey: The Impossibilities of Home in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and *Flores de otro mundo*" *Letras Hispanas: Revista de literatura y cultura*. 6.2 (2009) Available from: digitalcommons.butler.edu/facsch_papers/487/

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarship and Professional Work - LAS by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact digitalscholarship@butler.edu.

A Never Ending Journey: The Impossibilities of Home in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* and *Flores de otro mundo*.

Irune del Rio Gabiola
Butler University

What is home? The place I was born?
Where I grew up? Where my parents live?
Where I live and work as an adult?
Is home a geographical space, a historical
space, and emotional, sensory space?
Feminism Without Borders, Chandra
Mohanty

Reconsiderations of home have been crucially examined in Caribbean cultural productions. As Jamil Khader argues in her article on “Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: Community and Transnational Mobility in Caribbean Postcolonial Feminist Writings,” Caribbean feminists are faced with the task of challenging a conventional idea of home that has historically located women and other marginal subjects under conditions of oppression and exploitation. In focusing on the narratives by Aurora Levins Morales, Rosario Morales and Esmeralda Santiago, she points out the infinite sense of homelessness that invades, in particular, these Puerto Rican individuals who need to find more productive manners to articulate “home” while establishing a crucial critique of its traditional significance. Despite the postcolonial approach unfolded by Khader and by those Caribbean feminist scholars, the contemporary works I analyze in this article show a complex dialogue and juxtaposition between a desire for traditional home and the above mentioned sense of homelessness inherent to Caribbean marginal subjects.

Exploring the ambitious itineraries of Sirena in *Sirena Selena vestida de pena* (200) and Milady in the film *Flores de otro mundo* (1999), I emphasize the permanent dichotomy that exists when social outcasts face home, migration and forced displacement. The resolution to a sense of homelessness does not always entail the path of providing “subaltern cosmopolitanisms” stressing “international linkages and hemispheric connections” (Khader 73), but they are rather determined to eternal uncomfortable itineraries at the time that they long for a nostalgic prelapsarian idea of home. In this article, I call for the need to situate home in relation to experiences, therefore emphasizing a politics of affect and feelings structured through the characters’ material conditions. As a consequence of uneasy encounters in these migrations, the phantasy of home becomes both a destination that is always temporally and spatially postponed and a return to childhood memories and “suspended moments” concretized through songs and pictures.¹

In this fashion, the articulation of home that I provide draws upon theoretical frameworks examined by Sara Ahmed and Anne-Marie Fortier. In “Home and Away,” Ahmed urges us to think of home in terms of feelings and skin sensations through an erasure of simply locating individuals in fixed spaces or times. Instead of inhabiting home, the experiences of feeling at home inhabit the body. Similarly, Fortier centers her critique on narrations of queer migrations attempting to resignify “home” through attachments rather than as origin or destination. That is, the idea of home itself should be questioned in its linkage to a temporal and spatial linearity. As she argues, it is events brought up through memory and relations of contiguity with others that give us a sense of what it is to feel at home. Whereas I favor these views of home in the formation of the Caribbean characters Sirena and Milady, the issue of class needs to be crucially revisited since in its own genealogy home is a bourgeoisie invention.

What does home have to do with them?

As low class Caribbean individuals, the concept of having a home and therefore feeling at home clashes with the reality of homelessness. Aurora Morales Levins and Rosario Morales refer to this sense of homelessness from an intellectual and political standpoint that has traditionally excluded women from feeling at home. Instead, women were trapped into the confinements of domestic labor and patriarchy thus reinforcing the idea of home as oppressive. Nevertheless, notions of class are rarely discussed. In exploring the lives of Sirena and Milady –who could stand for a significant part of the Caribbean population –homelessness is unquestioned. They are economically deprived individuals who have to struggle to survive in the streets, through prostitution and at some points through unfair games whose rules are set up by business men and agents of neoliberal economies. Historically, both Sirena and Milady are doomed to perpetuate their colonial and social status, their race and marginal genders. In this respect, what does home have to do with them? As Linda McDowell mentions, “The house is the site of lived relationships, especially those of kinship and sexuality, and is a key link in the relationship between material culture and sociality: a concrete marker of social position and status” (92). Hence, the sense of familiarity and comfort provided by home is straightly related to material and cultural capital. The processes of socialization created by Sirena and Milady are furthermore determined due to their social condition, and their ability to choose with whom they will establish home is absent. Their original homes as physical spaces are dysfunctional, as we will see in the case of Sirena. Although he struggles to make it a home through singing boleros once he lost it, the reality cannot be compensated by a nostalgic phantasy of home.

In Western thought, home has been narrated as the intimate space of the family supposed to bring the comforts worked and revealed through the labor of the mother. If some feminists have consequently envisioned home as oppressive, others have deployed it as a site of resistance.² Either way, Sirena and Milady need to speak of home, probably because they do not feel at home in their migrations –if they ever felt home at all.³ Originally residing in the outskirts of San Juan –Sirena–and Havana –Milady–, they are forced into a movement away from the islands to escape poverty and social ostracism. It

would be complicate to refer to the concept of nomadism proposed by postmodern approaches such as the ones offered by Rosi Braidotti who analyzes it as a resistant tool to claim agency and celebrate transgression. Sirena and Milady do so because of their social and racial othering and what they endure to survive constantly reinscribes them as colonial subjects unable to escape their national and social condition. Domestication and sexual objectification are the common denominators of their lives and to a large extent, of what they symbolize: the histories of Puerto Rico and Cuba.

Hispanic Caribbean identity has been constituted through the trope of family and home as main components of nation formation. Celebrating the rural land as the purity of identity, the white peasant of Spanish ancestry represented the ideal nation. Intellectuals in the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century erased racial subjects confined to the coastal lines of the islands, or to the Dominican/Haitian border in the case of the Dominican Republic. In this sense, home was conceived as the recipient of moral values preserved by the Christian family. However, home was structured hierarchically and female and black subjects were constrained to the periphery. Women were the mothers and wives in charge of educating their children in a healthy moral environment and blacks remained in spatial boundaries read as hypersexual and ahistorical objects. With the first migrations to the U.S., ironically promoted through the U.S. military and political presence in the Hispanic Caribbean, the island as home is introduced in the conventional collective memory as the lost origin, representing the arcadia versus the dehumanization symbolized in the U.S. landscape. Postmodern literary and critical discourses envision, on the contrary, a new idea of home seen as a process more than as a static place related to traditional family values and cultural homogeneity. Therefore, the trope of home, of the island as static has been contested by interpretations that speak of home as a mobile signifier.

Despite all these resemantizations of home and the island from a political perspective, issues of class remain elusive in a broader picture about identity formation. Sirena and Milady are but products of their own times and, therefore, objects to be consumed by external forces prompted by globalization. On the one hand, the Hispanic Caribbean has been constructed as a place that contains family values and the virtues of Christianity. On the other side of the spectrum, the Hispanic Caribbean symbolizes the place of lust, the exotic other, and the recipient of sexual tourism.⁴ The islands are trapped between their national imaginaries founded by *criollos* and the Western mind that projects them as opportunities for leisure time and sex. In this direction, Sirena and Milady are rejected by a traditional concept of home but actively incorporated in the neocolonial perspective structured by the West: they become objects to be consumed primarily by the “one” who is away in terms of geography: the Dominican business man—in the case of *Sirena Selena*—and the Spaniard building contractor Carmelo—in *Flores de otro mundo*. How then is it possible for Sirena and Milady to think of home due their marginal status? In what follows, I will focus on the tensions created through a desire for a traditional home and their embodiment of home through attachments and feelings, mostly precarious.

Geographies of Home

Sirena Selena vestida de pena published in 2000 and written by Puerto Rican Mayra Santos Febres narrates the life of Puerto Rican young boy Sirenito/Sirena who abandoned by his mother at birth, was raised by his grandmother. From a low class *jíbaro* family, Sirena lived with his grandmother and they both cleaned houses for a living. After his grandmother's death, Sirena chooses the streets in order to avoid being sent to a foster home by social workers. Immersed in the underground life of drugs, he is rescued by drag queen Valentina who offers him a temporal home to move him away from that world. When Valentina dies of drug-addiction and physical abuse, Sirena finds himself in the streets again. One day, he was cleaning the floors of a bar while singing boleros, and at that moment, transsexual Martha Divine decides to take care of him. Envisioning a future for herself due to Sirena's voice, Martha adopts him and trains him as a drag performer, teaching him the arts of drag shows. Since Sirena is underage, he cannot work legally in Puerto Rico and therefore, both of them travel to the Dominican Republic upon having established business contacts with hotel managers to participate in drag performances. Once they are in the Dominican Republic, Sirena takes his own way and becomes the personal performer and lover of Hugo Graubel. The economic rewards Sirena achieves through these encounters and the money he steals from Hugo may allow him to materialize his goal to become a drag queen in New York and, eventually, to create a family. The novel insinuates that Sirena may have embarked on this trip whereas Martha Divine returns to the island to capture other street boys that would actually replace Sirena's role as adoptive son and as material investment.

The presence of family histories associated with processes of social transformation in Puerto Rico is revealed through both Sirena and Martha. During Operation Bootstrap in 1940s, many *jíbaro* families lost their lands and settled in developing urban centers. Sirena belongs to this familial genealogy that suffered from territorial displacement as part of Puerto Rican industrialization. Through the use of memory, Sirena brings to the present time of the narration family and history tales told by his grandmother. It is those particular "suspended moments" and conversations what created a sense of belonging and home for him. Therefore, whenever he is performing for unknown rich business men or having sex with older and manipulative men, he sings boleros; retrieving melancholically the figure of the grandmother and relocating home from a past into a present that despite its disfunctionality, contributes to intimacy, love, and belonging. Influenced by his earlier experiences, all Sirena wants for the future, is a "home." Sirena is praying to Piedra Iman to protect him, before landing in the Dominican Republic: "Por eso quiero que tú hagas que mi casa sea próspera y feliz y que la buena estrella me guíe y alumbré mi camino... quiero tener poder y dominio para vencer a mis enemigos, quiero que tú me guíes por el camino opuesto, opuestísimo a cuando hacía las calles. Poder cantar como si no hubiese pasado nada, como cuando era chiquito y tenía casa y familia. Había miseria...pero éramos felices" (15). Making home of the past symbolizes the impossibility to construct a present in their own terms; being subject of his own life. Despite all the hardships suffered by Sirena and his grandmother, his attachment and positive affect with her produces the feeling of home, safety and protection. Here home, more than being space of belonging, represents what Ahmed

suggests in “Home and Away”: that “the question of home and being-at-home can only be addressed by considering the question of affect: being-at-home is a matter of *how one feels or how one might fail to feel*” (89). The way he fails to feel at the present moment of the plot is counterbalanced by how he felt with his grandmother.

The novel opens with the image of a plane in the Dominican Republic. It is therefore, the arrival of Martha and Sirena. Once they land, Martha immediately performs a traditional family unit of mother and son vacationing in the neighboring island. They go to the Hotel Conquistador where Sirena rehearses under the orders of Martha to prepare the drag shows for business men. In this itinerary, Sirena envisions the possibility for autonomy and independence by using his sex and voice as main instruments for self-sufficiency. While in the Dominican Republic, Sirena is constantly traveling; the hotel, the taxis, the beach, Hugo Graubel’s mansion and limousine: “se había ido a la playa de Bocachica” (58), “La Sirena se sentía como una estrella de cine, siendo traída de regreso a su hotel... en el carro con chofer de su empresario” (65) “yo sentadita en el asiento del conductor” (235) “se escapó un momento a caminar por la orilla del mar” (217). It is precisely this competence to move that makes him establish relations with others based primarily on repulsive affects since his desire is always and already postponed. He ends up abandoning Martha and Hugo traveling, supposedly to New York.

Consequently, Sirena’s itineraries encompass the Hotel Conquistador, rides on cabs, the beach Boca Chica, Hugo’s mansion and hotel rooms. In this fashion, Sirena is exposed to precarious feelings that involve his desire for traditional home while providing these spaces and relations as the actual home. In order to overcome a feeling of homelessness due to his commitments with unfamiliar bodies and intimacy with strangers, Sirena returns to the boleros; reminiscent of what was one felt like home. Under these circumstances, Sirena creates a nostalgic idea of home remembering his grandmother who used to sing those same boleros while she worked as a *domestica*. It is a mental space that provides Sirena with home based on affective attachments to her grandmother and on “suspended moments” of familiarity and comfort. Here memory works as an instrument to grasp a sense of home that, following Ahmed and Fortier, is not located anywhere or trapped into a physical space but rather related to moments where attachment and familiar bodies functioned productively. Sirena’s memories include intimate and safe relations he also created in the streets. Therefore, Valentina and Marta become significant individuals with whom Sirena could feel comfortable. Home, for Sirena, is an idea spatially and temporally deferred to an elsewhere. As Fortier mentions, for queer migrants, home is deferred. However, a return to “suspended moments” of comfort and familiarity brought into the present articulate a conception of home compensated by a sense of homelessness.

In a similar direction, Milady longs for a very traditional idea of home while constantly moving through precarious and positive feelings created with others. *Flores de otro mundo* directed by the Spaniard Iciar Bollain and released in 1999 focuses on the trip organized by the locals in the Spanish rural town of Santa Eulalia. This event would bring women to inhabit that space in order to marry and build families. Most of the natives of the town are old men and old women who fear depopulation since young generations are choosing the cities as more convenient places to live. The three

protagonists of the film are Marirrosi from Bilbao, Patricia from the Dominican Republic and Milady from Cuba. Marirrosi and Patricia are participants of the organized event. If Marirrosi wants to find a man because of the loneliness she feels after her divorce, Patricia aims to marry a man in search of a better life to provide for her children. Milady arrives at the town invited by Carmelo who apparently visits Cuba quite frequently. The town unifies the Caribbean women despite their different experiences and personalities. Milady appears to be an autonomous and strong woman who wants to enjoy life and dreams of meeting an Italian boyfriend he had in Cuba, whereas Patricia prioritizes the needs of her children and accepts domesticity and domestication as productive ways to establish a functional family. In the end, Patricia marries Damián and both will conceive another child. Milady, however, leaves the town being unable to accept the domestic confinement and sexual demands imposed by Carmelo.

Milady is trapped in the circuits of neoliberalism that have penetrated Cuba since as Amalia Cabezas affirms, “the tourism industry is the primary economic development strategy in both Cuba and the Dominican Republic...Sex with tourists is one of a broad spectrum of services and activities in which people engage to procure earnings. But sex tourism is not just about sex and money; it is about other kinds of opportunities as well.” But within opportunities such as migration or autonomy, the subjects are still subjugated or colonized by more powerful “others”; Sirena depends on Martha and Hugo, whereas Milady is conditioned by Carmelo from the very beginning. Milady may have probably worked as a *jinetera* “perceived as providing primarily commodified sexual services and companionship to foreigners” (Cabezas). Enrico was, therefore, another tourist he met in Cuba who promised her a better future. She arrives in Santa Eulalia with Carmelo, in his Toyota pick-up truck. Nonetheless, it is one more of the many trips Milady makes in order to get to the elsewhere where a traditional conceptualization of home might be reproduced. In forging her own self identity, Milady is constituted as a permanent traveler who aims at escaping domestication and sexual objectification. Like Sirena, Milady employs strategically her sexuality and domesticity through repulsive attachments. Her life in Santa Eulalia takes place in Patricia’s house, Carmelo’s house, in a disco and beach in Valencia; all of them connected through cars, motorbikes and trucks.

These precarious feelings and relations are displaced by the use of pictures from Cuba. In a particular instance, Milady is babysitting Patricia’s daughter and shows her family pictures: “Mira, esta es mi mama y esta es Marirrosi. Esta soy yo, y este es mi hermano.” Before showing her the pictures, she talks to them on the phone mentioning how much she misses them: “estoy bien, no me pasa nada, un poquito sola, que los añoro mucho pero nada...” Her family obviously detects sadness in her voice and she starts crying. By taking the pictures, Milady retrieves “home” through “suspended moments” that capture the happiness of being with her parents and brother; of feeling home. Like Sirena with the boleros, Milady compensates homelessness with the visual representation of a family past. Despite the hardships of Cuban life, her family appears idealized in a past that following Ahmed “becomes associated with a home that is impossible to inhabit and be inhabited by, in the present. The question of home then of being-at-home and leaving home is always a question of memory” (91). The family album becomes the space for comfort and familiarity.⁵ During her stay in Santa Eulalia, Patricia becomes her

intimate friend with whom she will establish close bonds to overcome the physical abuse exercised by Carmelo. Both positive and negative attachments to other bodies structure Milady's life. Carmelo beats her up when she disappears for a couple of days. Since she cannot stand the tortures she is suffering, she decides to leave and travels with a young man from the town towards Northern Spain. This man falls in love with Milady and prepares a future for themselves with no consideration for Milady's opinion. In the end, Milady takes her own way and in her last scene, she is packing and leaving by herself.

For both Sirena and Milady, a traditional conceptualization of home is always already postponed to the elsewhere, operating uniquely in their minds, as a melancholic past they have incorporated through boleros and pictures. In fact, their longing for home is constituted in repulsive affects that have marked their bodies and have propelled the need for home. As Ahmed mentions "The experiences of migration –of not being in a place one lived as home –are felt at the level of embodiment, the lived experience of inhabiting a particular space, a space that is neither within nor outside bodily space. Throughout the story, the trauma and pain of not being fully at home is narrated through skin sensations" (92). Moreover, Sirena and Milady literally suffer bodily pain since they are abused by Hugo and Carmelo. In this sense, their experiences are framed through grief, estrangement and the impossibility to recreate a home that only exists in their minds. For this reason, their original sense of homelessness encourages the proliferation of the desire for home –understood in a very traditional sense- that simultaneously is made "home" through false memories or failures of memory. As a consequence, class avoids while reinforces a conventional view of home that is eventually experienced through relations, attachments and emotions towards others. In these itineraries, they can not escape their social position and they resort to memories of "suspended moments" in order to survive.

As it can be noticed, Sirena and Milady represent contemporary marginal subjects in Puerto Rico and Cuba who play the game of free-market economy; they are commodities consumed by new economic networks afforded in late capitalism. As Kristian Van Haesendonck argues in reference to Sirena, "la situación colonial ha creado nuevas dependencias económicas y comerciales, pero, por otra, ese tipo de colonialismo paradójicamente ha venido aportando nuevas posibilidades de supervivencia" (87). In both cultural productions, these new possibilities are still governed by powerful individuals. Their past cannot be idealized; neither the mental idea of home they retrieve from the past. Nonetheless, in the present time, they find themselves caught in relationships of subjugation and precariousness away from home, from which once they wanted to escape in order to become desiring subjects. But perhaps, home is not for them: home is a geographical, sensory and emotional space that channels "suspended moments" in the present, creating a nostalgia postponed to an elsewhere that only resides in their mind.

Notes

¹ In her book *Outside Belongings*, Elspeth Probyn coins “suspended beginnings” to memories of childhood seen as event that remind us of home. I would call these particular moments, “suspended moments” due to the possibility of repetition in the present of the characters and to emphasize the idea of event instead of origin or essence.

² Linda McDowell argues how home analyzed as oppression has been criticized by black feminist scholars and writers for whom home as physical space has constituted an escape from oppressive relations of slavery and racist society (89).

³ In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym indicates how when we are home, we do not need to talk about it. For her “to be at home...is a state of mind that doesn’t depend on an actual location. The object of longing, then, is not really a place called home but this sense of intimacy with the world; it is not the past in general, but that imaginary moment when we had time and didn’t know the temptation of nostalgia” (12). In this regard, my view of home in this article focuses on this idea of moments as well that the characters need to retrieve to overcome conventional nostalgia and to create a sense of intimacy with the context they live in.

⁴ This idea is brought up by Kamala Kempadoo in her book *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race and Sexual Labor*, where she explore contemporary social relations in the Caribbean and how neocolonialism and new forms of exploitations restructure the economics of the islands.

⁵ Yeon Soo-Kim examines the importance of family pictures in the construction of identity. In *The Family Album: Histories, Subjectivities and Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Culture*, she dedicates a chapter to *Flores de otro mundo* emphasizing that the pictures bring together different cultures while reinforcing the traditional idea of the family.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London; New York: Routledge, 2000.

Boym, Svetlana. *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books, 2001.

Braidotti, Rosi. *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*. New York: Columbia U P, 1994.

Cabezas, Amalia. “Between Love and Money: Sex, Tourism, and Citizenship in Cuba and the Dominican Republic.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 29.4 (2004)

Fortier, Anne-Marie. “ ‘Coming Home’: Queer Migrations and Multiple Evocations of Home.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 4 (2001): 405-424

Flores de otro mundo. Dir. Iciar Bollain, 1999.

- Kempadoo, Kamala. *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor*. New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2004.
- Khader, Jamil. "Subaltern Cosmopolitanism: Community and Transnational Mobility in Caribbean Postcolonial Feminist Writings." *Feminist Studies*. 29.1 (2003): 63-82
- Kim, Yeon-Soo. *The Family Album: Histories, Subjectivities, and Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Culture*. Lewisburg : Bucknell U P, 2005.
- Levins Morales, Aurora and Rosario Morales. *Getting Home Alive*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Firebrand Books, 1986.
- MacDowell, Linda. *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade. *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*. Durham: Duke U P, 2003.
- Probyn, Elspeth. *Outside Belongings*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Santiago, Esmeralda. *America's Dream*. New York, N.Y.: HarperLibros, 1997
- Santos-Febres, Mayra. *Sirena Selena vestida de pena*. Barcelona: Mondadori, 2000.
- Van Haesendonck, Kristian. "Sirena Selena vestida de pena de Mayra Santos-Febres: ¿transgresiones de espacio o espacio de transgresiones?" *Centro Journal: centro de estudios puertorriqueños*. 15.2 (2003): 79-97.