

2021

Transgressing boundaries of identity, geography and time in Transmutadxos and La mucama de Omicunlé

Lucinda Smith

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, lucindanna.smith@e-campus.uab.cat

Follow this and additional works at: https://repository.lsu.edu/tete_a_tete



Part of the [Caribbean Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [French and Francophone Language and Literature Commons](#), [Modern Languages Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Smith, Lucinda (2021) "Transgressing boundaries of identity, geography and time in Transmutadxos and La mucama de Omicunlé," *Tête-à-Tête*: Vol. 1, Article 7.

Available at: https://repository.lsu.edu/tete_a_tete/vol1/iss1/7

Transgressing boundaries of identity, geography and time in *Transmutadxos* and *La mucama de Omicunlé*

by Lucinda Smith

The transgression of boundaries appears time and again in the narrative works of both Rita Indiana (1977) and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro (1970); such boundaries include those of sexual or gender identity, orientations of desire, geography, time and even life or death. Further to this, Rita Indiana and Yolanda Arroyo share a fair deal of common ground: both writers were born in the 1970s in the Hispanic Caribbean, Rita Indiana in the Dominican Republic and Arroyo in Puerto Rico. Rita Indiana also currently resides in Puerto Rico, where much of her literary texts are first published. Although the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico are different in many ways and each has their own unique cultural influences, the two countries share a history of colonialism which continues to influence social and cultural dynamics to this day. The most obvious example of such impact is probably the importation of Christianity, and more particularly Catholicism (although that is more recently giving way to Evangelical Christianity (Parker and Olavarría, 2018). Originally imposed by the Spanish colonialists, Catholicism has had a marked influence on, amongst other things, gender roles and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ society. In Puerto Rico, a 2008 study involving 929 people found that:

El 47% de las personas participantes piensan que Puerto Rico no es un lugar seguro para las personas gay, lesbianas, bisexuales y transgénero. Un 17% indicó sentirse neutral ante esta aseveración y sólo 35% indicó que estaba de acuerdo o parcialmente de acuerdo en que Puerto Rico es un país seguro para personas de la comunidad GLBT. (Toro-Alfonso, 2008: 59)¹

¹ '47% of participants think Puerto Rico is not a safe place for gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people. 17% indicated that they felt neutral towards this statement and only 35% indicated that they agreed or partially agreed that Puerto Rico is a safe country for the LGBT community' (all translations my own)

[L]a mayoría de las personas participantes (N= 588, 63%) informaron que habían sido víctimas de insultos verbales por razón de su homosexualidad. [...] Otras personas informaron que habían sido “corridos o perseguidos”, “golpeados o pateados” o que le “habían tirado con algún objeto” por razón de su orientación sexual. (Toro-Alfonso, 2008: 55)²

These findings clearly indicate a widespread homophobic tendency across the country, impacting the sense of security and belonging of the LGBTW+ communities. The cultural backgrounds of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico are significant to the works of both writers; in a literary sense, since both cultures are used as backgrounds in the narratives, and in the real world, influencing how the authors and the texts themselves are received by local audiences. Sophie Large notes that ‘[L]a sociedad descrita por las novelas de Rita Indiana Hernández se caracteriza por las discriminaciones y dominaciones que restringen la libre expresión de las identidades subalternas’ (Large, 2018: 1)³, while Arroyo Pizarro herself describes her country as ‘un país del Caribe tradicionalmente machista y culturalmente racista’ (Arroyo, 2016: 40)⁴. Arroyo’s observation of the machismo deeply rooted in traditional Puerto Rican culture is further supported by Asencio’s affirmation that:

feminism was conceptualised as another form of cultural colonialism by the United States as well as a threat to Puerto Rican men’s masculinity and heteronormativity [...] Thus Puerto Rican lesbians simply by their identities as lesbians challenge a nationalistic discourse embedded in the conceptualization surrounding Puerto Rican (heterosexual) “womanhood” and notions of family (Asencio, 2009: 3)

² ‘[t]he majority of participants (N=588, 63%) informed us that they had been victims of verbal insults due to their homosexuality [...] Others said that they had been “embarrassed or persecuted”, “punched or kicked” o that they had “objects thrown at them” due to their sexual orientation’ (all translations my own)

³ ‘The society described in Rita Indiana Hernández’s novels is characterised by the discriminations and dominations which restrict the free expression of subaltern identities’ (all translations my own)

⁴ ‘a traditionally sexist and culturally racist Caribbean country’ (all translations my own)

Meanwhile, Arroyo's allusion to cultural racism in addition to sexism indicates layers of intersectional Otherness. Like Arroyo, Indiana addresses the intersection of race and ethnicity with gender and sexuality, and how dominant power structures in the Dominican Republic marginalise those who are perceived as Other and/or do not adhere to national and cultural ideas of normativity. Large comments on this when she writes that:

A través de sus representaciones del racismo, del sexismo y de la homofobia, las novelas de Rita Indiana Hernández [...] cuestionan las posibilidades de acceso a espacios de libertad para las minorías subalternas en República Dominicana – aunque esta problemática no es, desde luego, exclusiva de este país.' (Large, 2018: 1)⁵

While the transgression of boundaries in Indiana's and Arroyo's narratives is not limited to sexual and gender identity, it is arguably one of the most pertinent landscapes for such transgressions across both writers' narratives. A clear example is found in the novel *La mucama de Omicunlé* (2015), in which the protagonist Acilde is a trans character. Acilde is born female, but in the early pages of the novel presents as a boy and shows desire to physically transition. Indiana writes that:

Antes de trabajar en casa de Esther, Acilde mamaba huevos en el Mirador, sin quitarse la ropa, bajo la que su cuerpo – de diminutos pechos y caderas estrechas – pasaba por el de un chico de quince años [...] A veces se esmeraba tanto en parecer un colegial cogiendo aire fresco, recostado sobre el banco, con pie sobre la rodilla, que se olvidaba de para que estaba allí (Indiana, 2015: 14)⁶

In this extract, the reader can see that Acilde presents as masculine professionally as a sex worker, but also does so for themselves on a more personal level; this 'role' of schoolboy is not

⁵ 'Through her representations of racism, sexism and homophobia, Rita Indiana Hernández's novels [...] question the possibilities to access spaces of freedom for subaltern minorities in the Dominican Republic' (all translations my own)

⁶ 'Before working in Esther's house, Acilde sucked dicks on the Mirador, without removing their clothes, under which their body – small-chested and slim-hipped – passed for that of a fifteen-year-old boy [...] Sometimes they were so absorbed in seeming like a schoolkid getting some fresh air, reclined on the bench, one foot on their knee, that they forgot what they were there for'. (All translations my own. Here I translate the possessive article 'su', which is gender neutral in Spanish, as 'their' rather than his/her).

just for the clients but rather is one in which they absorb themselves and appear to feel comfortable. Further to this description of Acilde's self-presentation, Indiana describes how Acilde's grandparents:

le daban golpes por gusto, por marimacho, por querer jugar pelota, por llorar, por no llorar, golpes que ella desquitaba en el liceo con cualquiera que la rozara con la mirada [...] Con el tiempo, los nudillos se le agrandaron a fuerza de cicatrices forjadas contra frentes, narices y muros. Tenía manos de hombre y no se conformaba: quería todo lo demás./ Los viejos aborrecían sus aires masculinos. El abuelo César buscó una cura para la enfermedad de la nieta, y le trajo a un vecinito para que la arreglara mientras él y la abuela la inmovilizaban y una tía la tapaba la boca.' (Indiana, 2015: 18-19)⁷

This segment renders clear two things. The first is that Acilde is uncomfortable in a female body; they feel masculine inside and want their exterior to match. As such, Acilde can be confidently defined, as far as one's gender identity can be defined, as a trans character; the use of the Rainbow Bright drug later allows Acilde to obtain this desired male body, allowing their gender identity and physical body to correspond.

Further to this, the extract also depicts the social intolerance of the trans community in the Dominican Republic. Acilde's grandparents are deeply intolerant of their grandchild's lack of conformity to standard gender roles. If the reader interprets Acilde's grandparents as a representation of wider Dominican society – or, as part of an older generation, then at least of the more traditional attitudes held in the country – one can then infer that in Dominican culture, the LGBTQ+ community is widely marginalised. The suggestion, although not directly stated,

⁷ 'beat [Acilde] for fun, for being a tomboy, for wanting to play ball games, for crying, for not crying, beatings which [Acilde] avenged at school with whoever looked at them wrong [...] Over time, their knuckles grew due to the scars forged against foreheads, noses and walls. They had the hands of a man and it didn't fit: they wanted everything else. / The oldies detested their masculine ways. Grandfather César found a cure for the granddaughter's illness, and brought over a neighbour to sort her out while he and the grandmother held her down and an aunt covered her mouth.' (All translations my own. Here I use the feminine 'her' where Indiana has used the feminine 'la' in the original Spanish).

of the neighbour ‘arreglando’ Acilde is that he rapes her/them at the request and with the physical aid of the family. Such a brutal method, termed as ‘corrective-’ or ‘curative rape’ (Doan-Minh, 2019), has been seen throughout various societies and time periods as a method to ‘cure’ women of homosexuality or non-heteronormative behaviour. I argue that Rita Indiana depicts the adults’ abuse and violation of Acilde to demonstrate an extreme symptom of the intersection of misogyny, homophobia and transphobia in Dominican society. While not every LGBTQ+ youth will experience an event of this nature, the underlying bigotries and prejudices which cause such acts are still common and very real. As such, when viewed against a cultural background defined by heteronormativity and their own personal circumstances of abusive family and community members, Acilde’s refusal to conform to traditional ideas of sex-gender correspondence is highly transgressive.

The character of Acilde not only transgresses boundaries of gender identity, but also of socio-economic status over the course of the narrative. When Acilde reveals that ‘<<yo quiero estudiar para ser chef, cocinar en un restaurante fino y con lo que junte mocharme estos pellejos.>> Los pellejos eran los pechos que se tocaba con ambas manos’⁸ (Indiana, 2015: 16), they again confirm their desire to transition physically from female to male. Additionally, Acilde displays the desire to be a high-class chef. As Acilde, a trans sex worker whose ‘rondas en el Mirador apenas le daban para comer y pagar su servicio de datos’⁹ (Indiana, 2015: 17), let alone pay for culinary school, this ambition would be at best difficult to attain. Indiana also writes that:

‘La habitación de Acilde en casa de Esther es uno de los cuartuchos obligatorios de los apartamentos de Santo Domingo del siglo XX, cuando todo el mundo tenía una sirvienta que dormía en casa y, por un sueldo por debajo del mínimo, limpiaba, cocinaba, lavaba,

⁸ “I want to study to be a chef, cook in a high-class restaurant and with what I earn get rid of these bits of skin.” The bits of skin were the breasts they were touching with both hands’ (All translations my own)

⁹ ‘rounds on the Mirador barely earned enough to eat and pay for data service’ (All translations my own)

cuidaba niños y atendía los requerimientos sexuales clandestinos de los hombres de la familia.’¹⁰ (Indiana, 2015: 17)

This description illuminates the traditional position of a woman as servile and exploited. The maid/master relationship is an especially hierarchical demonstration of gender roles: the man, economically more powerful, provides (often a pitiful amount of) money for the woman, and in return expects not only that his home and family are maintained and nurtured, but also that his sexual desires are met. Meanwhile, the female role – in this case the maid – is trapped in the domestic sphere and is subjected to male dominance. Rita Segato reflects on the gendered separation of the public and domestic spheres, observing how, influenced by colonial invasion, the political and public space in Latin America (and, I would argue, across much of the world) is:

por marca de origen y genealogía: 1) masculino; 2) hijo de la captura colonial y, por lo tanto, a) blanco o blanqueado; b) propietario; c) letrado; y d) pater-familias (describirlo como «heterosexual» no es adecuado, ya que de la sexualidad propiamente dicha del patriarca sabemos muy poco). [while] Este proceso devalúa abruptamente el otro espacio, el doméstico, hasta ese momento abarrotado por una multiplicidad de presencias, escena de las actividades de las mujeres y regido por éstas. (2016: 94)¹¹

Segato’s point not only underlines that the public scene is established as masculine, but also highlights the importance of race and being head of the nuclear family unit. In comparison, the

¹⁰ ‘Acilde’s bedroom in Esther’s house was one of those dumps obligatory in Santo Domingo apartments from the 20th century, when everyone had a servant who slept in the house and, for pay under the minimum wage, cleaned, cooked, washed, cared for the children and attended to the clandestine sexual desires of the men of the family.’ (All translations my own)

¹¹ ‘By nature of its origin and genealogy: 1) masculine; 2) result of colonial capture and, therefore, a) white or whitened; b) landowner; c) literate; and d) pater-familias (the description “heterosexual” is not appropriate, as we know very little about the true sexuality of the patriarch). [...] This process abruptly devalues the other space, the domestic, until that moment crowded with a multiplicity of presences, now the scene of women’s activities and governed by these women’ (translation my own)

‘feminine’ scene of the home and the private is undermined, and those who maintain it are considered subservient.

Returning to the theme of transgression, Acilde subverts this traditional role of the maid, starting in a female body in a maid’s chamber and later becomes the man in control; in this latter role, it is also worth noting, they do not repeat the tradition of exploiting women. Following Acilde’s transition into Giorgio and subsequent travel to the future, he indeed fulfils his adolescent ambition and becomes a successful restaurateur. Sophie Large observes that:

a Acilde [...] se la reduce en el título a su función de criada (“mucama”). Indiana Hernández realiza pues un desplazamiento que se basa en una jerarquía social y realza la cuestión de la clase que la novela se esmera en describir¹² (Large, 2018: 2).

It is clear, then, that Acilde overcomes barriers not only of sex-gender correspondence, but also of socio-economic status and opportunity, reflected in their journey from impoverished sex worker to maid to restaurateur.

In Arroyo’s collection *Transmutadxs* (2016), the theme of transgressing sex/gender boundaries is also prominent throughout the short stories. The narrator of the first tale, for example, is Fabián - a transgender character who transports illegal immigrants from the Dominican Republic to Puerto Rico. The following conversation takes place between Fabián and Chango, one such immigrant:

¿Cómo es que no tienes tetas?

Me las operé.

El silencio se vuelve incómodo para él, no para mí [...]

no puedo imaginar cómo una mujer ...

No soy mujer.

¹² ‘Acilde is reduced to her job as maid. Indiana Hernández then creates a shift based in a social hierarchy and highlights the question of class which the novel strives to describe’ (All translations are my own)

Perdón. Es cierto. Mala mía.¹³ (Arroyo, 2016: 29)

Here, Fabián's identity as a trans man is explicitly acknowledged both in his verbal affirmation and by his choice to physically confirm his gender identity by removing his breasts. The fact that Fabián does not have male genitalia receives two opposing reactions: when Macarena, Fabián's girlfriend, 'observa y palpa *el sustituto* que les dará los placeres prometidos, accede [...] me asegura que yo soy *lo más macho* que ha tenido entre las piernas'¹⁴ (Arroyo, 2016: 23). Macarena, then, shows an immediate and complete acceptance of Fabián's identity and masculinity. Meanwhile, Changó is eager to confirm that '*[e]s que me dijeron que tú "eres especial", que no penetras*' (Arroyo, 2016: 18)¹⁵; Fabián recounts to the reader that his other male lovers have also been relieved by this same idea and consider him exotic as a result. One can read here that due to the lack of traditional penetration, these male lovers do not necessarily recognise their sexual relations with Fabián as sex which 'counts', so to speak, or which threatens their masculinity or heterosexuality. Large observes 'A la multiplicidad de identidades sexuales responde, en la obra de Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, una multiplicidad de relaciones de poder, todas imbricadas entre sí' (Large, 2019: 259)¹⁶. To the men who make these transactions with Fabián in exchange for reduced fees in their illegal immigration, the idea of dominance and power seems to be explicitly linked to the act of penetration - establishing a heteronormative, binary framework in which they understand the sexual act (dominant/subordinate, strong/weak, penetration/reception, masculine/feminine, etc). It is this

¹³ 'How is it that you don't have tits? /I had an operation. /The silence becomes uncomfortable for him, not for me [...] /I can't imagine how a woman ... /I'm not a woman. /Sorry. It's true. My bad.' (All translations my own)

¹⁴ 'observes and massages *the substitute* that will give her the promised pleasure, she agrees [...] she assures me that I am *the most macho* that she has had between her legs' (All translations my own)

¹⁵ '*It's that they told me you are "special", that you don't penetrate*' (All translations my own)

¹⁶ 'To the multiplicity of sexual identities there is a response, in the work of Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro, of a multiplicity of power relations, all interwoven with each other' (All translations my own)

possibility of penetration, and its perceived implications, which blatantly unnerves Changó. However, Changó's desires cross boundaries of their own.

In Arroyo's short stories, identity and orientations of desire both transgress boundaries and are often, but not always, linked. Desire and its orientations recur frequently throughout Arroyo's text, rather more so than in *La Mucama de Omicunlé*. The first of Arroyo's stories, as I mentioned, features the character Changó. As seen above, he is initially preoccupied by the possibility of penetration; however, in a later scene, it is he who requests 'méteme los dedos' (Arroyo Pizarro, 2016: 28)¹⁷ to Fabián. There is thus an initial crossing of the boundaries of what he thought he would want or accept, and what he then desired in the moment. Interestingly, he later reflects that penetration and 'meter con los dedos no es lo mismo'¹⁸ and is then 'desfigurado por la desilusión o el desaliento'¹⁹ (Arroyo Pizarro, 2016: 30) when Fabián questions whether he differentiates it 'porque no te dolió?'²⁰ (Arroyo Pizarro, 2016: 30). Changó's transgression in his own desires, then, is at odds with his willingness to confront it; his physical desire crosses a boundary which it appears his mind does not or cannot. Regarding his mentality, prior to the sexual encounter with Fabián he insists upon not being penetrated, and after shows clear discomfort with the idea of - and his participation in - it. Arguably, it is not the prospect of physical pain which creates his discomfort (since, as Fabián notes, it did not hurt him), but rather the problem is what penetration represents for Changó; that is, being dominated by another man. Meanwhile, this act against which he has a psychological barrier is one that in the moment he both actively requested and enjoyed, his desires therefore crossing his own lines of acceptability and respectability.

¹⁷ 'put your fingers inside me' (All translations my own)

¹⁸ 'putting your fingers in isn't the same' (All translations my own)

¹⁹ 'disfigured by disappointment or distaste' (All translations my own)

²⁰ 'because it didn't hurt?' (All translations my own)

In the following story, and continuing the theme of desire, the narrator tells the reader ‘[q]uieres besar a gente distinta. Al chico afeminado que usa collar de cuentas parecida a perlas [...] Luego cumplen diez años los dos y juegan tú y él escondidos como si fuera fiesta dentro del armario de la abuela Petra. Allí se pintan los labios mutuamente’ (Arroyo, 2016: 33-34)²¹. She continues that ‘[q]uieres besar a esta gente distinta, y la idea va creciendo contigo a medida que aumentas en años y estatura [...] en marimacherías y rudezas que te obligan a vestirse de tomboy, de niña-chico.’²² (Arroyo, 2016: 34). These extracts explicitly reflect the protagonist’s desire for ‘different’ people, whether that be the ‘feminine’ boy in childhood or later the trans sex worker ‘Leticia’, after whom the story is titled. Later, the narrator (who describes herself as Afrolesbian) is the lover of the protagonist, referred to only as ‘You’. The narrative technique of telling the story in the second person is interesting, in that it breaks the barrier of the fourth wall. The ‘you’ is the narrator’s lover, but it also inherently addresses the reader, involving them in the narrative. It could be argued that this technique, which blurs the boundary between characters and reader, underlines the transgressive nature of the story’s characters and their desires. ‘You’ – or indeed ‘Your’ – sexual orientation is clearly queer, neither restricted or defined by either gender or heteronormative expectations; her greatest desires and emotional connections seem to be with those marginalised as Other, those who themselves cross boundaries of identity and desire. It is significant that the two children play inside a wardrobe, alluding to the phrase ‘in the closet’, signifying the secrecy surrounding both these children’s senses of identity and orientation. Like Indiana’s Acilde, as a child the protagonist is referred to as ‘marimacha’ and ‘niña-chico’, although unlike Acilde it is not necessarily implied that ‘You’ is trans. What is clearly conveyed, though, is the character’s rejection of heteronormative

²¹ ‘[y]ou want to kiss different people. The effeminate boy who wears a fake pearl necklace [...] Later you both turn ten years old, and you play hidden in Grandma Petra’s closet as if there were a party. There you paint each other’s lips’ (All translation my own)

²² ‘[y]ou want to kiss different people, and the idea grows with you as you grow in age and height [...] in the tomboyishness and roughness which pushes you to dress like a girl-boy’ (All translations my own)

expectations not only in her desires, but also in how she presents herself, including shaving her head and wearing so-called masculine clothing; as discussed above, in Arroyo's work the transgression or blurring of boundaries surrounding identity and desire are often interconnected. Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology is particularly useful in this context of queer identities and orientations, and why they are considered so disruptive and subversive to heteronormative and patriarchal structures. Ahmed states that:

Cuanto más trabajamos ciertos partes del cuerpo [...] más podemos hacer con él. Al mismo tiempo, cuanto menos trabajemos otros músculos, menos podremos hacer con ellos. De modo que si el género conforma lo que <<sí hacemos>>, entonces conforma lo que podemos hacer. El género podría por tanto describirse como una orientación corporal, una forma en que los cuerpos son dirigidos por sus acciones a lo largo del tiempo.²³
(Ahmed, 2019: 89)

While Ahmed here refers to gender and its performativity, her argument can also be applied to orientations of desire. My interpretation is that queerness – in any of its forms – is inherently disruptive to established power structures in society. That is, by refusing to conform with patriarchal and heterosexist norms, or to stay hidden in the closet and invisible, non-heteronormative and queer people challenge the discourse of how they are defined and what they can achieve; in doing so, they question and destabilise the hegemonies which maintain the domination of some (often white, heterosexual, cis-gender men) and the subjugation and exploitation of others.

This interpretation is supported by Ahmed's further statement when discussing Freud's work on perversion, commenting that:

²³ 'The more we work a certain body part [...] the more we can do with it. Equally, the less we work certain body parts, the less we will be able do with them. In the way in which gender shapes "what we do", it thus shapes what we can do. Gender can therefore be described as a corporeal orientation, a way in which bodies are directed by their actions over time' (All translations my own)

en cuanto un punto se desvía de esta línea recta hacia la unión heterosexual, estamos ya creando un punto perverso [...] Para algunos teóricos queer, esto es lo que convierte al <<perverso>> en un punto de partida útil para reflexionar sobre las <<desorientaciones>> de lo queer, y cómo puede cuestionar no solo los presupuestos heteronormativos, sino también las convenciones sociales y las ortodoxias en general.²⁴ (2019: 112)

So, Ahmed's argument is that any deviation away from the 'straight line' that is the expectation of heterosexuality can question not only heteronormative ideas, but social conventions on a greater scale. In addition to supporting my interpretation of how queerness inherently challenges social hegemonies, this argument highlights the relevance of Rita Indiana and Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro's work. By depicting characters with identities and orientations of desire which transgress cis- and heteronormative categories, they are giving representation and voice to people who are commonly rendered invisible; moreover, the authors are using their works to directly challenge the social conventions and structures of power and privilege in the Hispanic Caribbean.

The third and final story of *Transmutadxs* on which I will focus, *Hijos de la Tormenta*, is another example of the crossing of boundaries of physical sex and sexual desire, and the social resistance these transgressions can face. The narrator of the story, Mario, is son to two mothers, Isabel and Alfonsina. In the 1970s, Isabel and Alfonsina:

realizan una ceremonia simbólica en la que ambas se visten en blanco y celebran su amor con los pies descalzos sobre las arenas de la Puntilla [...] Invitan a los familiares que están a favor de su unión y desdeñan a aquellos que alegan no estar del todo convencidos. Igual no hacen falta. Eso lo aprenderé con el tiempo.²⁵ (Arroyo, 2016: 126)

²⁴ 'as soon as a point deviates from the straight line towards heterosexual union, we are already creating a perverse point [...] For some queer theorists, this is what turns the "perverse" into a useful starting point to reflect on the "disorientations" of queerness, and how it can question not only heteronormative assumptions, but also social conventions and orthodoxies in general' (All translations my own)

²⁵ 'have a symbolic ceremony in which both dress in white and celebrate their love with their bare feet in the sands of Puntilla [...] They invite relative who are in favour of their union and disregard those who say they aren't totally convinced. They don't need them anyway. I will learn that with time' (All translations my own)

There are two distinct elements in this extract which interest me, the first being the resistance of some family members to Isabel and Alfonsina's relationship. The symbolic ceremony also indicates their inability to legally marry at the time – same-sex marriage only being legalised in Puerto Rico in 2015. Indeed, in 2014, Arroyo and her partner (now wife) joined the *Conde-Vidal v. Rius-Armendariz*²⁶ case to remove Puerto Rico's ban on same-sex marriage. These points reflect the widespread homophobia in Puerto Rican culture. However, the counterpoint to this prejudice is the couple's attitude. The characters' determination to show and maintain their love for each other in the face of legal and familial rejection, indeed their indifference to said rejection, is both radical and hopeful; they won't be pressured into changing or hiding themselves or their relationship.

Mario's father, meanwhile, provides another example of transgression – this time in a physical sense, changing from female to male by a biological process. He is a Dominican man who:

proviene de un área denominada Salinas [...] donde se da un fenómeno singular que ha sido documentado por médicos y expertos de ciencia: los güevedoce./ Ser un güevedoce significa nacer hembra, completamente niña, y al cabo de alcanzar la pubertad desarrollar un crecimiento inusitado de genitales de macho. [...] Todo esto de manera espontánea y sin intervención extrínseca alguna. Así que todos los güevedoces hemos sido mujeres antes de los doce años, y luego de esa edad comenzamos la conversión en varón.²⁷
(Arroyo, 2016: 134)

Like Acilde, Mario and his father change sex – however, unlike Acilde, this is not a gender confirmation process but rather a genetic condition which refers to a particular kind of intersexuality which exists primarily in the Dominican Republic. Simplistically, until puberty

²⁶ Later *Conde-Vidal v. Garcia-Padilla*.

²⁷ 'comes from an area called Salinas [...] which is home to a unique phenomenon which has been documented by doctors and scientific experts. /To be a güevedoce means to be born female, totally a girl, and at puberty develop an unexpected growth of male genitals. [...] All of this totally spontaneous and without any outside influence. So all of us güevedoces have been women before the age of twelve, and after that age we started the conversion into being men.' (All translations my own)

güevedoce children do not have visible male sex organs and appear to have a vagina, and therefore are perceived as girls; however, during puberty the second rush of testosterone causes their male sex organs – until then undeveloped – to grow. The child often continues their development into adulthood as male. In the Dominican Republic, güevedoces are accepted as a third gender. Further to Mario's physical transition from appearing female to appearing male, another form of boundary-crossing we see is in the character Roberto. With this character, we return to the theme of desire. On the one hand, Roberto shows intolerance of Mario's family and his condition, lamenting that:

Ya sé por qué [Paula] se quiere matar. [...] Este pendejo mundo está loca. Cómo es eso de que tienes dos madres y son lesbianas? Cómo es eso de que tu padre, que en realidad no es tu padre, es dominicano?²⁸ (Arroyo, 2016: 128)

This rejection again reflects wider attitudes in Puerto Rico regarding the LGBTQ+ community and immigration; it also hurts Mario deeply. However, Roberto later feels attraction to Mario; although he never openly declares it, he 'aprovecha la oscuridad después de la puesta de sol y se acerca. Y me besa.'²⁹ (Arroyo, 2016: 132). As with Changó's attitudes towards penetration, the reader finds a clash between Roberto's prejudices and his desires. However, Roberto cannot live with this duality, this transgression of his own orientation of desire – in this case, desiring another man in a way he considers unacceptable - and he commits suicide. Mario reflects that he will never understand 'por qué Roberto desaparece; por qué deja de existir tan de repente [...] Acaso preferiría lo no binario, la no dualidad que representa dejar de ser.'³⁰ (Arroyo, 2016: 136). This last phrase draws attention to another binary which Roberto crosses during the story; that between life and death, existence and non-being. Wittig argues that:

²⁸ 'Now I know why [Paula] wants to kill herself. [...] This fucking world is insane. How is it that you have two mothers and they're lesbians? How is it that your father, who in reality isn't your father, is Dominican?' (All translations my own)

²⁹ 'takes advantage of the darkness after sunset and comes closer. And he kisses me.' (All translations my own)

³⁰ 'why Roberto disappeared; why he stopped existing so suddenly [...] Perhaps I would prefer the non-binary, the non-duality which is represented by ceasing to be.' (All translations my own)

In the dialectical field created by Plato and Aristotle we find a series of oppositions [...] under the series of the “One” [...] we have “male” (and “light”) that were from then on never dislodged from their dominant position. Under the other series appear the unrestful [...] all reduced to the parameter of non-being. For Being is being good, male, straight, one, in other words godlike, while non-Being is being anything else (many), female: it means discord, unrest, dark and bad’ (Wittig, 1992: 51)

Building on Wittig’s statement, we can argue that binary structures are not only restrictive, creating rigid categories by which to define ourselves, but can also pave the way for hierarchies. To disintegrate such a rigid system, in which we can only be one or the other, would eliminate permanent change and allow for greater fluidity and freedom. Of course, some binaries seem impossible to dissolve - such as the one, the final one, that pains Mario after Roberto’s death. However, the story seems to highlight that the dissolution of binaries, as Mario would prefer, would render the need to identify as one thing or the other (masculine/feminine, male/female, hetero/homosexual, cis/trans, central/peripheral) obsolete.

While desire is a prominent theme in *Transmutadxs*, sex in *La Mucama de Omicunlé* is primarily a source of income for Acilde in the early chapters, as well as for Acilde’s mother. Having said this, one interesting example of desire and transgression within the novel is that of the character Argenis’s relationship with Roque. Argenis’s difficulty with his sexuality receives some attention; he has clearly internalised his father’s homophobia, which instils in him a sense of shame and fear. This manifests in a violent desire to sexually subjugate women and an outward disdain for gay men, which is marked in ‘su mirada condescendiente [...] que usaba con animales, mujeres y maricones’³¹ (Indiana, 2015: 164). The character Malagueta regards Argenis as ‘un mamagüevo que nunca podría mirarse al espejo sin miedo’³² (Indiana, 2015:

³¹ ‘his condescending look [...] that he used for animals, women and gays’ (All translations my own)

³² ‘a cocksucker who could never look at himself in the mirror without fear’ (All translations my own)

164). However, later in the novel Argenis succumbs to his desires and engages in sexual relations with Roque, who is in fact another of Acilde's identities in another time period.

One could argue that it is Argenis's movement through time which allows him to engage more freely in this sexual relationship with Roque, because he believes that it does not impact on his reality in the present. In an inverse reflection of how Acilde's change in sexual identity facilitates their ability to exist in different time periods and fulfil their ambitions, it is Argenis's existence in these different periods which facilitates his ability to – if not quite come to terms with – at least engage with his own orientations of desire.

In fact, time travel in and of itself is a transgression of boundaries; in this case, that of linear time. This movement is also, as referred to above, inherently related to the other transgressions we see throughout the text: Argenis's engagement with his sexual desires, Acilde's embodiment of their gender identity and their subsequent rise through the socio-economic system. Vera-Rojas words it well when she writes that common points seen across Indiana's novels are:

la movilidad, la migración, la creación de un espacio de transición [...] Sus relatos proponen la movilidad como la característica que define la concepción del tiempo, del espacio y de los cuerpos que habitan más allá de los binarismos entre nación e inmigración, homosexualidad y heterosexualidad, mujer y hombre, ciencia y naturaleza, normalidad y abyección, literatura y ficción³³ (Vera-Rojas , 2017: 219)

It is this intersection of transgressions and transitions, of various kinds and magnitudes, which makes *La mucama de Omicunlé* such an interesting book. To add to Ver-Rojas' point, it can also be argued that the novel rejects classification of genre, incorporating elements of climate fiction, science fiction and queer literature to create a work which would be challenging to categorise. *Transmutadx*s perhaps incorporates fewer genres and is rather more realistic than

³³ 'mobility, migration, the creation of a space for transition [...] Her stories propose mobility as a characteristic which defines conceptions of time, space and the bodies which live beyond the binaries between nation and immigration, homosexuality and heterosexuality, woman and man, science and nature, normality and abjection, literature and fiction' (All translations my own)

La mucama de Omicunlé. However, Arroyo's narrative still challenges conventions of linear time; particularly in *Los hijos de la tormenta*, the narrative jumps between different time periods, from the present (in which Roberto commits suicide in the car), to the 1970s and moments during Roberto and Mario's relationship in the more recent past.

Both texts also touch upon transnational migration. *Transmutadxs* uses migration between the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico as a plot point in various stories (including two of the three analysed here). Meanwhile, in *La mucama de Omicunlé* Haitians seeking refuge from a quarantine in their country are picked up off the street by machines 'con la diligencia de un niño glotón que se lleva a la boca caramelos sucios del suelo'³⁴ (Indiana, 2015: 12); the imagery of dirty sweets indicates the disdain with which the Haitian refugees are considered by society and the state. Another of Rita Indiana's novels which focuses with greater depth on migration between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, and the xenophobia to which the migrants are subject, is *Nombres y Animales* (2013). Arguably, both time travel (whether this be by the characters or the narration) and migration across national lines are physical reflections of the other, less tangible barriers which the characters cross throughout the texts.

The works of Arroyo and Indiana can be characterised by their questioning and destabilisation of social hegemonies. Such established power structures maintain the domination and privilege of some and force those who do not conform, who do not stay in their place, into the periphery. This lack of conformity with national ideals can manifest as breaking with traditional concepts of sex-gender correspondence and non-heteronormative sexual behaviours or orientations of desire; it can also appear in connection to themes of race and nationality. According to Fernanda Bustamante, Indiana exposes and:

³⁴ 'with the diligence of a greedy child putting dirty sweets from the floor into their mouth' (All translations my own)

se resiste a perpetuar el silenciamiento de ciertas experiencias, prácticas y subjetividades de la realidad dominicana. Apela, por tanto, a una estética política de la realidad dominicana. Apela, por tanto, a una estética política de la visibilización y reconocimiento de lo periférico, de lo ignorado, del margen.’³⁵ (2017: 284)

Whether the ‘ignored’ to which Bustamante alludes be women, the LGBTQ+ communities, racial or ethnic minorities, or the intersections of these, Indiana sheds light and gives representation to such bodies. Arroyo, who describes her work as *lesboterrorismo* on her website and refers to herself as an ‘AfroQueer activist warrior’³⁶ on her Twitter biography, is also uncompromising in her campaign to give voice to people most often silenced and shunned: primarily Afro-Puerto Rican lesbians, but also trans people, sex workers, those who are in some way ‘Other’. To end this article, it seems fitting to discuss two poignant quotations from *Transmutadx*s. The first is a conversation between two children, both of whom blur the lines of sex-gender correspondence and have their first romantic feelings for peers of the same gender (the narrator for Joanna, and Ricardo for El Cano). The narrator asks Ricardo ‘-Por qué no te quiebras? Cómo lo haces?’³⁷. He responds by saying ‘[n]o hay nada a que renunciar [...] Uno es como es.’³⁸ (Arroyo, 2016: 98). This conversation underlines an important point: many of the transgressions and transformations experienced by the characters across both texts are less about changing from one state or place to another; rather, they allow the characters to strip away the expectations forced upon them by society and their communities.

The story *Changó* ends with a scene of a bonfire into which the transporters throw the ‘ropa y antiguos títulos de identidad [of the migrants] ahora deberán pasar por otra persona. Un

³⁵ ‘resists perpetuating the silence of certain experiences, practices and subjectivities of the Dominican reality. She appeals, therefore, to a political aesthetic of the Dominican reality. She appeals, therefore, to a political aesthetic of the visibilisation and recognition of the periphery, of the ignored, of the margin.’ (All translations my own)

³⁶ [\(1\) YolandaArroyoPizarro \(@YArroyoPizarro\) / Twitter](#)

³⁷ ‘Why don’t you break? How do you do it?’ (All translations my own)

³⁸ ‘There’s nothing to give up. We are how we are.’ (All translations my own)

desdoblamiento, una usurpación quizás como pocos ... o como muchos'³⁹ (Arroyo, 2016: 31). This symbolic and practical burning of the migrants' previous identities, and their geographic displacement, find a reflection in the transition of Fabián, who 'alguna vez [fue] Fabiana'⁴⁰ (Arroyo, 2016: 30). The transformations are reminiscent of that of a phoenix, a connection reinforced by the image of the bonfire; both indicate the new possibilities and new freedoms which can come with the transgression of boundaries, whether this be of name, nation or sexual identity. Reading into Fabián's comment, we can interpret that the transgression of boundaries is a possibility that is within many, if not all of us; the possibility to break the strictures and standards of how and what we should be, to start again, as someone new, or somewhere new, or even as a more authentic version of ourselves.

Works Cited:

- Ahmed, Sara. (2019). *Fenomenología queer : orientaciones, objetos, otros*. Ediciones Bellaterra. Barcelona.
- Asencio, Marysol. (2009). "Migrant Puerto Rican Lesbians: Negotiating Gender, Sexuality, and Ethnonationality." *NWSA Journal*. 21. 1-23.
- Arroyo Pizarro, Yolanda. (2016). *Transmutadxs. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform*. Carolina, Puerto Rico.
- Bustamante, Fernanda. (2017). "Rita Indiana Hernández: una escritura que retuerce los márgenes". *Rita Indiana Archives*, Ediciones Cielonaranja, Santo Domingo-Berlin.
- Doan-Minh, Sarah. (2019) "Corrective Rape: An Extreme Manifestation of Discrimination and the State's Complicity in Sexual Violence", *30 Hastings Women's L.J.* 167. Available at: <https://repository.uchastings.edu/hwlj/vol30/iss1/8>

³⁹ 'clothes and old identity documents [of the migrants] now they will have to pass for someone else. A split, a usurpation perhaps like few ... or like many' (All translations my own)

⁴⁰ 'once was Fabiana' (All translations my own)

Indiana, Rita. (2015) *La mucama de Omicunlé*. Editorial Periférica. Cáceres.

Large, Sophie. (2018) “En busca de espacios de libertad en régimen patriarcal, capitalista y

neocolonial: Minorías sexuales y raciales en Rita Indiana Hernández”. *Libertad.*

Libertades. Estudios de Filosofía, Historia y Artes del mundo ibérico e iberoamericano.

Eds: Juan Carlos Zambrana, Alfredo Gómez Muller, Marie-Hélène Soubeyroux et
Mónica Zapata. El Barco Ebrío. Madrid.

“El activismo queer, feminista y decolonial en la literatura de Yolanda Arroyo Pizarro:
por un pensamiento de la Relación”. *Centro Journal*. Volume XXX, Number ii,
Summer 2018.

Parker, Cristián, and Margot Olavarría. (2016) “Religious Pluralism and New Political

Identities in Latin America.” *Latin American Perspectives*, vol. 43, no. 3, pp. 15–30,

www.jstor.org/stable/24765381. Accessed 30 Jan. 2021.

Segato, Rita. (2016). *La guerra contra las mujeres*. Traficantes de Sueños. Madrid.

Toro Alfonso, José. (2008). *Por la vía de la exclusión: Homofobia y ciudadanía en Puerto*

Rico. Estado Libre Asociado de Puerto Rico Comisión de Derechos Civiles.

Vera-Rojas, Maria Teresa. (2017) “¡Se armó el juidero! Cartografías imprecisas, cuerpos

disidentes, sexualidades transgresoras: hacia una lectura queer de Rita Indiana

Hernández,” *Rita Indiana Archives*, Ediciones Cielonaranja, Santo Domingo-Berlin.