

“THE FIRST WAVE OF CONTEMPORARY MEXICAN CABARET: QUEERING THE DRAMATIC TEXT OF THE CULTURE”

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Cabaret is a genre well known for its playfulness, irony, ambiguity, and parody. Furthermore, cabaret has been and continues to be a tool through which artists express poignant criticism of their societies. Mexican cabaret has a rich tradition of such dissident expression. Due to its intimate connection to current affairs and its link to a strong theatrical tradition, Mexican cabaret can be used as an open map of knowledge for understanding the links between sexual and political ideologies in contemporary Mexico. In this paper we analyze cabaret as a quintessential urban production, characterized by fragmentation and improvising and with the potential of carrying out a radical analysis of the official symbolic order. In doing so, cabaret often becomes a social force that produces critical knowledge in an urban setting. In fact, in present day Mexico City cabaret has emerged as part of the globalized displacement of forms of knowledge. The oral and visual order, traditionally subordinated under the writing system, is suffering a constant deterioration in present times. This phenomenon originated in the new models of knowledge and texts that emerge through a new transnational arena and new technologies, especially computers and the Internet (Case 2003). This process has rationalized the market as the main organized principle of symbolic production (Martín-Barbero 2003). While cabaret artists may be critical of such order, their popularity is certainly related to the displacement of formal/canonical theater and connected to the search for cultural manifestations more closely reflective of the post-modern realities of their audience.

It is possible to see a connection between cabaret and melodramas (particularly soap-operas) because melodramas in Latin America go back to the forms and styles of traditional entertainment, such as popular fairs and oral storytelling (Martín Barbero 1993). These traditions are also at the origins of Mexican cabaret. Hermann Herlinghaus states that specifically melodramatic narrations of ordinary life constitute anachronistic and alternative forms of modernity (2002), therefore providing the possibility to study cabaret from the point of view of melodramas. Nevertheless, Mexican cabaret is quite different from soap operas because it presents an open challenge to traditional gender roles and conservative politics. While several contemporary Mexican soap operas offer a critique of political corruption and a few even include a gay character in a supporting role, they still tend to reinforce the traditional heterosexual couple as societal role model. This is quite different from several cabaret artists who either explicitly or implicitly manner their dramatic narrations to worldwide political movements such as gay and lesbian rights, indigenous rights, and women's rights, to name a few. For this reason, we consider Mexican cabaret to be related more to deterritorialization and not to melodrama. Though contemporary use of the term deterritorialization may have its origin in French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, particularly in their *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), here we refer to Nestor García Canclini's redefinition of deterritorialization as the process of the loss of 'natural'

relation of culture to geographical and social territories (*Hybrid Cultures*). By the end of this article, we will have shown that today's Mexican cabaret is a decentralized means of critical awareness that flows outside and inside the culture's official web of information and education. Mexican cabaret puts itself in a unique position by mixing entertainment and analytical knowledge while remaining part of the deterritorialized, fragmented experience of contemporary Mexican culture. Contrary to most Latin American postmodern entertainment productions, cabaret has emerged as an urban cultural manifestation operating almost entirely beyond the realm of technology.

In order to illustrate the role cabaret plays in creating unorthodox dramatic text in Mexican culture, we will focus on five well-known Mexican cabaret artists whose work we consider to be challenging to the mainstream of sexual representation and political agendas. Astrid Hadad, Paquita "la del Barrio," Tito Vasconcelos, Jesusa Rodríguez, and Francisco García Escalante, known as "Francis,"(*) are five artists whose cabarets offer a humorous and flexible space for the expression of sociopolitical and sexual dissidences.

Whereas Hadad and Rodríguez are openly lesbian, and Vasconcelos and Rodríguez are very active in promoting Lesbian and Gay agendas, Paquita and Francis are critical of gender-based discrimination in a more individual and subjective manner. Despite their varying degrees of explicit or implicit radicalism, all five artists unveil the connections between compulsory heterosexism and political control in Mexican culture. At times their manner is mocking, while at other times they explore elements traditionally repressed by patriarchal culture; sometimes they even reproduce the very elements they wish to dispel (especially Francis).

Another purpose of this article is to examine elements of Mexican popular culture with respect to contemporary artistic intentions. Although current Critical Theory has used the term hypertext in relation to the cyberspace and Internet culture, we use hyper dramatic text here to better define the open structure of cabaret: fragmented sketches that flow around a general topic without sharing necessarily a explicit unity. As part of a hypertext narrative, Mexican cabaret is a crossroads of many cultural levels, texts and genres, in which different cabaret sketches conform a decentralized mosaic of the culture. Whereas Francis and Paquita are self-made popular artists with no interest in belonging to the Fine Arts category, Hadad, Vasconcelos and Rodríguez have studied drama and often elaborate upon their shows by playing with elements from the Western canon. We are specifically interested in how Francis and Paquita are creating a personal fissure within mainstream neo-liberal popular culture. By creating new lyrics for the well-known Canción Ranchera, Paquita's performances challenge the perception that Mexican women are passive and submissive. She also confronts the omnipotent attitude of Mexican men. In Francis' show, she uses her position as a transvestite cabaret artist to challenge the contradiction between male "public" homophobia and "private" Mexican homosexuality. Additionally, we want to discuss how Hadad, Vasconcelos, and Rodríguez work is a reaction to an inflexible understanding of life, and to the denial of Mexico's diversity by the political and social elite, which characterize much of the city's commercial theater.

Even though not all cabaret artists analyzed in this article are queer or sexually dissident (Paquita is a heterosexual singer), it is certain that all five challenge patriarchal Mexican culture, some in very explicit ways. Though they have all undergone a process of struggle and emergence in the last twenty years they have nevertheless been legitimized by the globalized Mexican entertainment market. Both Paquita and Francis have been invited to participate in soap operas and perform on television, though popular comedy shows mock them for either their public homosexuality (Francis) or their low-class, non-glamorous style (Paquita). We consider these

artists to be part of a deviation or perversion of the sexual norm because they challenge predominant conceptions of gender and sexuality. Perversion is used here in the sense given to it by Teresa de Lauretis, who called it a “perverse desire.” In De Lauretis’ *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire*, the term “perverse desire” was created largely due to a reconsideration of the construction of lesbian desire through a revisit to Freud, Laplanche and Lacan. Nevertheless, this reconsideration broadens our understanding of all kinds of sexualities. As part of a post-structuralist movement of the 1990s Queer Theory gives the idea that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. In this way queerness suggests that it is meaningless to talk in general about “lesbians,” “gays,” “women,” or any other gender group, because subjectivities consist of many and complex cultural factors. This is why sexualities (normative or perverse) belonging to cultures supposedly located outside of the dominant economic sectors of the Western World are especially appropriate for analysis by queer theory. In consequence, queerness can exist as a subset of gay and lesbian cultures but need not be exclusively related to them (Doty). As David W. Foster asserts: “The so-called gay sensibility and its lesbian counterpart are necessarily queer (although lesbians and gays may in some contexts endorse the straight), but queerness is something larger than gayness and lesbianism.” (1997) Consequently, in this research queerness is not just a synonym for gay and lesbian subalternities, because in this case cabaret performances impact and attract more than the gay or queer sector of Mexican society. The queerness, and queering they produce within the dramatic text of Mexican culture, is their deviation or perversion of the sexual norm as part of the deterritorialization and fragmentation such culture experiences today.

There are two basic contexts that provide grounds for understanding contemporary performance shows in Mexico City. One is the theatrical tradition in which the artists we analyze are immersed, Teatro de Revista (Musical Review Theater), and Teatro de carpa (literally Tent Theater; similar to Street Theater). The second is the current atmosphere in Mexico regarding manifestations of resistance, discrimination and democratization in the political arena. Marginality, be it social, sexual, political, or economic, has found modes of cultural expression throughout the history of Mexico. The city has always had grand neighborhood festivities, family parties, dance clubs, cabarets, innumerable cantinas and especially splendid theaters. While Mexican cabaret goes back to the nineteenth century, it is only until the beginning of the twentieth century that Teatro de Revista, Teatro de Carpa, and Mexican-made films helped bringing together Mexicans from all social classes (Monsiváis 1999). The modern imaginary of the city began at that moment, the Golden Age of Mexican Cinema (1930-40), and specifically with the carpa. It is not coincidental that this is also a historical moment many performance artists try to recover. Although cabaret and Teatro de carpa are not uniquely Mexican, the circumstances as to how the Mexican carpa became a scenic space in which circus and frivolous theater were mixed are very particular to Mexico. The carpa was the marginal theater of the musical Revista of the twenties and thirties. In the same way it was the crucible where many artists who later went on to work in the Teatro de Revista and in the movies perfected their craft. These artists portrayed average Joes who had mastered the ability to play with words. Such is the case of Cantinflas; a famous carpa actor who overwhelmed audiences with long monologues that, while appearing educated, meant nothing (Pilcher). These characters depicted a very important subversive element typical of the carpa: because they were marginalized by the urban dynamics, they made fun of urban institutions and urbanites (Merlin). The carpa allowed Cantinflas and others like him to have theatrical space for cultural symbols of the low-classes and social outsiders: the leper, the bald/skinny/fat man, the provincial/illiterate country man, the diva, the prostitute, the drunkard, the stoner, all characters which spawned popular figures with similar exaggerated characteristics such as the well known Palillo, Tin Tan, Pedro Infante, or Ninón Sevilla.

Today, cabaret performance artists are developing multiform cultural productions in private owned or rented spaces that do not require governmental support. In this sense, they are all continuing a tradition. From the writings of Sor Juana to the present, theater as an art that relates to the present shows a strong conflict between a hegemonic society and the many subaltern segments of a population. Regarding women in Mexico, Jean Franco calls this conflict “the struggle for the power of interpretation” (Franco 1989, 87), which implies one's own rights need not be interpreted by anyone else. We can refer to this struggle for one's right to self-interpretation by asking the fundamental question of Gayatri Spivak concerning the struggle for the voice (“Can the subaltern speak?”). Our research interprets this struggle for a voice as a struggle for a body, in other words, as a struggle for a less repressive social construction of the sexual self.

ASTRID HADAD

In Astrid Hadad's cabaret work, one can see how her performances are specifically related to the Diva figure of the 1940s Mexican cabaret and Musical Review Theaters. Hadad recovers the autonomous space of the Diva as a resistant theatrical space. The Diva was a model for all classes as they broke with conventions and found spaces for behaviors and ways of being that were previously inconceivable for women in Mexico (Constantino 1995). Hadad also is interested in combining these elements with a bellicose contact with the public. Instead of merely recreating the autonomous space of these Mexican women, Hadad intended to take the Diva figure on a new historical step toward non-masculine or anti-straight space. Her performances do, however, reflect a desire to recover historical lesbian singers such as Lucha Reyes. One could say that it was through the life of Reyes that Hadad found the most characteristic ingredients for her performances: the dramatization of the lyrics, a tough voice, an aggressive attitude toward the audience, and wearing Mexican national symbols on stage. Reyes liked to scandalize the public by incorporating Mexican symbols such as nopales or the Mexican Eagle into her outfit. Hadad has tried to maintain a cantina-like environment by promoting the *ranchero* aspects of the show, which include the rude manner in which she sings and interacts with the public.

One of the purposes of Hadad's cultural representations is to overwhelm the audience with her artistic splendor. This baroque element comes from different traditional Mexican spheres such as religious icons, kitsch popular culture, and Musical Review Theatre. These components are based on sensuality, carnality, and the pleasures of musical and visual aesthetics. The necessity of these components is closely related to the desire of the artist to define her body as the show or the performance itself. One's perception of their body, however, is dependant upon his or her social and historical experience. Her cabaret looks for another rationale and a different combination of cultural elements that will create a contrasting order of knowledge, as did the baroque style in the 16th and 17th centuries. As an example, in 1992 she based her show *La monja coronada* on the visual iconography of colonial nuns. In the video performance *Corazón Sangrante* there is a segment in which Hadad appears as a sleeping Coatlicue, the goddess of all gods for Aztec culture. During her sleep, her body becomes *Ixtacciuatl*, the sleepy woman (also one of the volcanoes that surrounded Mexico City), and she then wakes up as the Virgin. The syncretism of her multiple costumes and habits allows Hadad to play with the hegemonic proposals that began during colonial times concerning women's bodies. At the same time the lyrics of the song correspond to a heartbroken woman who laments her abandonment and mistreatment by her man. This abandonment and mistreatment extends to include all the feminine aspects of Mexican history since the so-called “Discovery.” All these meanings are implicit in the humorous and clever scene where Coatlicue becomes the *Virgen de Guadalupe*. These religious icons are, for Hadad, the foundations of the multifaceted identity of the Mexican people. They contain both

regressive and progressive elements. Hadad makes these progressive elements more explicit and visible. Pecadora (2001) is a delightful example of this transformation of the non-progressive elements into something more healthy and liberating for Mexican women. Hadad knows that she performs within a Catholic culture, in which the division between religious and mainstream cultural icons is virtually nonexistent; they are one and the same. For this reason, Hadad uses a theatrical strategy of visibility that summarizes both the social construction of women, and the religious construction of saints, Jesus Christ, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and other Catholic icons. She resemantizes these hysterical and residual emblems from a progressive perspective. Paradoxically, by playing around with cultural icons Hadad also shows how she belongs to them, how to respect them, how to be part of them and, at the same time, how to resist the patriarchal ideology implicit in them.

Hadad not only wants to offer the baroque style to her audience as a mix of indigenous and Hispanic heritages, but also as a contemporary mestizaje (miscegenation). In her show *La Cuchilla* (2003) Hadad mixes Ranchera songs with boleros, tangos, rumbas and Cuban sones. It is a hyper dramatic text of multiple musical periods and genres that are updated and resemanticized on her body. It is also a style that does not pretend to delve deeply into false dualism, such as the dualisms of rural culture versus urban culture or modern culture versus indigenous culture. In fact this is a dualism clearly maintained by the neo-liberal market approach. She may incorporate references to current political affairs in dressing for her performances, such as a hat with a Mexican eagle with the face of Salinas being screwed by the American eagle with the face of Clinton. (*La multimamada*, 1996) Not surprisingly, in the same show she also portrays Mexico as a woman's body being abused by its politicians. Hadad offered a similar dynamic with Bush, Blair and former president Aznar at the Forum Barcelona (2004).

In the same way that there was a resemantization of the European Christian icons in Latin American Baroque, Hadad's performances queer the traditional and contemporary emblems and icons of Mexican culture. Through the use of mystical and profane elements, Hadad's cabaret shows the history of her lesbian body, the history of a multiple, diverse, and fragmented self, in other words, the history of Mexico.

PAQUITA LA DEL BARRIO

Francisca Viveros Barrandas, a popular singer from Veracruz, is well known for her blatantly rude on-stage performance style, which mostly includes insults and reprimands directed at men. Paquita refers to men in her lyrics as garbage: useless, cheap, ordinary, inferior, human trash. In fact, she is commonly recognized throughout Mexico for one of her most favorite sentences: *¿Me estás oyendo inútil?* (Are you listening to me, good-for-nothing?) which Mexicans jokingly use in everyday conversation. Much of her popularity comes from the fact that despite her fame and riches, she remains an awkward and introverted woman seemingly unaffected by her status within Mexican popular culture. True to her humble lower-middle-class roots, Paquita is a shy woman who does not want to be a cabaret Diva like Hadad, but rather aims to be a popular ranchera singer. During performances, her appearance is that of a mature female singer who, despite her popularity as a performer, seems very uncomfortable on stage. An example of this is that she begins her show without any kind of preliminary introduction, starting right into song and usually ungracefully standing off-center on the stage.

The fact that Paquita is singing from a point of view derived from the Mexican construction of heterosexual love (which enforces woman's position of submission and suffering) is significant

because she displaces men from the center of the stage and challenges them by appropriating their role.

As an old, overweight, angry female singer, Paquita utilizes her body as the center of her text. She changes the focus of the female body on stage, which in patriarchal societies is ubiquitously the site of sexuality. The sexuality Paquita's body proposes is, from the sophisticated point of view of Mexico City postmodern nightclubs and en vogue MTV singers, an "unattractive" sexuality. In Paquita's case, the male desire aroused by the sight of the female body does not occur. Paquita breaks this implicit negotiation with the audience. It is obvious how this lack of patriarchal customs affects men's attitudes at her cabaret. However, while the tables in Paquita's cabaret are filled almost exclusively by women (administrative assistants, housewives, executives, retail workers, feminist intellectuals), there are many male fans who know her lyrics by heart and sing along with her. The public, both male and female, is interested in Paquita's lyrics as cultural representations of feelings that the mainstream culture does not express (Foster). Paquita's popularity is a consequence of the excessive male desires projected upon female performers that have created an image of unreal and submissive women who always respond to men hysterically. The unusual title of some of her songs shows not only a deconstruction of the traditional system of representation of women, but also how these songs place women on an autonomous role. Songs such as *Tres veces te engañé* (Three times I cheated on you), or *Bórrate* (Get Lost) are already part of the Mexican traditional repertoire.

Bodily difference has for century predisposed social structures by defining certain bodies as the norm, and defining those which fall outside the norm as 'Other,' with the degree of 'Otherness' being defined by the degree of deviance from the norm. As with many postmodern cultures, Latin America has created through mass media a fictional 'paradigm of humanity' into which some fit efficiently while others fit very poorly. Life outside the paradigm of humanity is likely to be characterized by loneliness and often cruelty (Clapton and Fitzgerald). This is why, although Paquita is a heterosexual singer, her cabaret is a queer dramatic production, because her audience is not entertained by the fulfillment of patriarchal desire, but rather it is the emancipation of the official version of the Mexican female body from the position of an 'Other' that captivates the audience. In this manner males and females alike are entrapped by Paquita's charismatic candor. Paquita's candid performance builds a net of codes and conventions from which women receive the cultural mechanisms to re-construct themselves as subjects. As opposed to theatrical objects, a subject exists at the intersection of cultural symbols and practices and can remold a system of signs (Case 1988).

It is important to recognize the reception phenomena in which Paquita's performance has been produced. These phenomena help us understanding the position of a marginal cabaret within certain socio-historic transformations. If we look at the critical comments Paquita has received from the beginning, we find that there has been a consistent trend toward her legitimization. Although her artistic project was initially made for a barrio cabaret audience, after 25 years her shows have seduced the hegemonic media. Televisa and TV Azteca in Mexico, and Univisión in the USA control the aesthetics of all Latino dominant cultural productions. It is clear that there has been a transformation of Paquita's critical discourse since her beginnings. A great part of this critical reterritorialization of her production started when Pedro Almodovar invited her to Spain in 1980. This relationship was the beginning of Paquita's legitimization within the broader cultural movement of the 80s and 90s from which new camp codes and aesthetics erupted in the Hispanic world. At the end of the 1980s, Almodovar's cinematographic productions introduced references to Spanish and Latin American queer and kitsch culture that in turn changed the Latin American perception and understanding of Paquita's cabaret.

JESUSA RODRÍGUEZ

Within the panorama of the Mexican capital's contemporary theater, Jesusa Rodríguez is probably one of the most original and controversial figures. Rodríguez and her partner, the singer/composer/pianist Liliana Felipe, founded an independent cabaret in Coyoacán called El Hábito. There, Rodríguez performed and directed more than 320 shows in ten years (1990-2000). El Hábito is now under the administration of Las Reinas Chulas, a group of contentious young satirists devoted to cabaret, and Rodríguez is now dedicated to independent projects.

All cabaret works of Rodríguez and Felipe are an open debate about contemporary theatrical forms. This attitude is related to the extensive journey Rodríguez has undergone throughout her long career departing from traditional theater, opera, operetta and finally arriving to cabaret. Like Hadad, Rodríguez is deeply influenced by German cabaret and Mexican Teatro de carpa, both from the beginning of the century. For her, cabaret is a “mother” genre in which it is possible to make use of all theatrical models in which she has been involved. Rodríguez satirizes contemporary Mexican politicians such as presidents, secretaries of state, and prominent people of Mexican cultural life. She also parodies historical lesbian symbols such as Frida Khalo—Trece Señoritas (1983), and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz--Los Empeños de una casa (1992), Sor Juana en Almoloya: Pastorela Virtual (1995). In these particular cases Rodríguez has represented her version of Mexican history by revisiting and emphasizing the dissident sexualities of these women, who have been hidden or strategically forgotten by official culture. Rodríguez’ cabaret expropriates national icons, removing them from the net of codes and meanings from which Mexican history gets power to support its hegemonic symbolic structure.

From within the parameters of the cabaret genre, Jesusa Rodríguez continues the conjectural line of Teatro de Carpa and explores the realm of entertainment in order to build her political dissidence. One of these explorations has to do with her job outside the cabaret. Teatro de carpa was the theater of the underdogs of the ‘20s and ‘30s in Mexico City, which mixed circus spectacles, political satire and frivolous theater. In order to resuscitate this dynamic Rodríguez has worked in many popular theatrical activities, especially with pastorelas: a colonial mixture of religious teachings, Indigenous-Mexican folklore, and mostly vulgar comedy. Though they initially developed as part of a trans-cultured form of religious practice in the 16th century, pastorelas exist today either as an evolved popular practice or as a self-conscious postcolonial strategy of avant-garde artists such as Rodríguez. Traditionally the plot revolves around the pilgrimage of shepherds to Bethlehem to see the newborn Christ Child, although according to medieval tradition an evil spirit is one of the most important characters. The titles of some of her pastorelas give us an idea of Rodríguez’ subversive modifications: Narco-pastorela: el cartel de Belén (1990), El derecho de abortar (1999), Pastorela terrorista (2004). Rodríguez’ “outside” cabaret work accomplishes an important task as a popular provider of alternative and alterable interpretations of Colonial and present times. All Rodríguez work queers official discourse that holds colonial history frozen in time.

It is important to mention the Mexican comedy company La Chinga (1997) when studying Rodríguez’ theatrical work “outside” the cabaret. Consisting of different young actors from marginal areas of Mexico City who have been trained by Rodríguez’ cabaret and other artistic colleagues, the company has made presentations in public places such as squares, parks, and schools using archetypal popular characters taken from the streets. This project has generated similar enterprises, such as Prometeo (2000), with a more political aim. Prometeo was created in memory of the 45 victims of the massacre of Acteal who were assassinated by Mexican federal

military forces, the government of Chiapas and PRI paramilitaries in 1997. Extending her work even farther, Rodríguez is frequently involved with confrontational street interventions, such as the time she fought against the construction of a commercial mall inside the Archeological Zone of Cuicuilco (1999). These ruins date back to 500 B.C., are the oldest large-scale construction in central Mexico still standing, and are now almost completely surrounded by new buildings due to the failure of the opposition's conservation campaign. Yet another example of Rodríguez' socio-political action was her opposition to the return of former president Salinas de Gortari, whom many believed was responsible for producing the contemporary economic crisis in Mexico. Rodríguez' response was to lead a group of protesters, who screamed strong political slogans such as "Get out criminal Salinas," "Salinas de Gortari: Drug Dealer-politician," and wrote the word "KILLER" in red letters across the stone wall surrounding Salinas' home.

One can see in these examples that Rodríguez believes cabaret to be a complex and intense political tool. Art and cabaret are for her inevitably linked to contemporary history. Rodríguez sees no separation between cabaret performance and street protest; both are crucial aspects to her work as an artist exploring the personal and public dramas of Mexican culture. From President Fox and his wife Marta Sahagún to Benito Juárez (Foximiliano y Martota-2003), almost all the icons of contemporary Mexican culture have been represented and recontextualized in Rodríguez' factory of symbolic transformations. As a queer dramatic production, her work looks insistently for the fissures of the Mexican patriarchy, not only to mock and parody them, but also to appropriate their power of interpretation.

TITO VASCONCELOS

As with Rodríguez and Paquita, Tito Vasconcelos is the owner of a cabaret, which he calls Cabaretito (which means "small cabaret" and is a combination of the word cabaret with his name, Tito). Through his work Vasconcelos has linked the canonic tradition (Greek Theater, Shakespeare, Dario Fo, Ibsen, and American Music Theater) with the Review Theater of the Mexican revolution. His cabaret is a balance between a theater/cultural genre known as Camp and Mexican Review Theater, focusing on the hyperbolic aspect of both genres. Whereas Revista exaggerates the archetypal characters of Mexico City, Camp exaggerates both queer aspects of lesbian and gay culture and also aspects of heterosexual gender construction. From Camp, Vasconcelos has taken a sense of superficiality that, in his cabaret, adopts the form of both a social and political criticism. Vasconcelos believes the intersection of these two seemingly incompatible cultural elements, "pop" culture and socio-politics, reveals Mexican life's deepest conflict.

As a consequence of his complex approach, Vasconcelos' cabaret demands constant metamorphosis. One can appreciate this metamorphosis in *Mariposas y Maricosas* (1984). Following the theatrical ideas of Charles Ludlam and his Theater of the Ridiculous, with whom Vasconcelos had studied in New York, Vasconcelos built a dramatic persona based on Chepina Peralta, a star of 1970s Mexican pop culture. In his representation of Peralta, Vasconcelos combined the Mexican Revista style, popular TV culture, Camp theater and political issues to produce one of his famous characters: Doctora Tatiana Ilhuicamina. Vasconcelos' Doctora Tatiana was, unlike Peralta, a feminist cooking teacher and gay rights advocate. As Armando Prieto asserts, with Vasconcelos' Doctora Tatiana both satirized and subverted the way in which popular heterosexual culture uses folklore and female characters, converting them into official icons of a supposed Mexican nationality ("Camp, Carpa and Cross-dressing"). The result is a rigid, unchanging female identity that leaves no room for the progressive elements of contemporary Mexican culture. It is this petrification of female identity that, through his

metamorphosis of popular female icons, Vasconcelos objects to. At the same time, Vasconcelos objects to the ways in which Mexican gay culture assumes onto gay identity the heterosexual feminine subjectivity embodied by female icons such as Peralta.

Unlike Rodríguez, whose sophisticated cabaret demands a high degree of political analysis from its audience, Vasconcelos is more interested in the popular roots of *Revista*. For this reason, although Vasconcelos and Rodríguez have worked together on projects such as *La Chinga*, Vasconcelos' cabaret tends to be more closely related to popular culture and gay culture, exploring icons and topics from Mexican "B" movies, advertising, and TV programs. *Sexo, pudor y aliens* (1998) is a good example; the title is a parody of a popular Mexican drama and later a film called *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, which attempts to show—not very successfully—the existential tribulations of high-class, thirty-something couples in Mexico City. As in the old *Revista* of the beginning of the century, in *Cabaretito* the actors are required to read newspapers and adapt their roles accordingly. An example of this type of cabaret is *Los Ángeles de Chente* (2001), which was created the same day as the inauguration of Vicente Fox as president of Mexico. During its first week running, the audience knew perfectly well the joking references being made to President Fox. In its second week, the topic of the president was losing interest, forcing the actors to move to other references such as the Zapatista movement, though they kept the structure of the original play. This dynamic implies a large investment of time and requires very skilled acting for improvisation, in which Vasconcelos is a maestro. This is also true for the new generation of actors and directors who are welcome to suggest any idea, topic, or play for his cabaret. Within the theatrical community, Vasconcelos is well known for his generosity and pedagogical skills.

One of Vasconcelos' most interesting projects was his work in regard to pedagogy alongside senior students of the CUT (Centro Universitario de Teatro-University Center for Theater), with whom Vasconcelos created the play *Shakespeare a la carta* (1997). In this cabaret, the audience would choose a sketch according to a menu they received upon arrival at the theater. Vasconcelos and his students recreated most of the dynamics of the *Comedia Dell'Arte*, but they did so from the perspective of Mexico City's gender and archetypal characters from Mexican lithography of the 19th century. As we can see from this example, Vasconcelos' cabaret work is significant because of his postmodern translation of the old Musical Review Theater's dynamics from the beginning of the century. His adaptation of canonical theater via gender issues and pop culture has produced one of the most critical yet hilarious Cabaret Theater shows in Contemporary Mexican history.

FRANCIS(*)

Our fifth performance artist is firmly rooted in popular culture. Francis is a drag queen who has had a very long artistic career. She was initially an actor in films, soap operas, and plays, though she eventually became the owner of her own company of celebrity impersonators. Francis has toured in the most important cities in Mexico and has visited California and Texas with her show. She frequently performed in one of the most popular and traditional theaters in the history of Mexico City: *La Blanquita*. The audience of this theatre is made up mostly of married or engaged lower class couples, a group which does not represent the demographic that usually attends transvestite shows. The popular acceptance of Francis' show is astonishing because homophobia is a common characteristic of Mexican culture. As with Juan Gabriel, a very popular gay singer whom today is a national icon, Francis portrays an explicit queerness that is striving for validity. The marginality of Francis' drag queen performance in the context of the performing arts is more critical than the other artists analyzed in this article because, in spite of her

popularity, there is no mention of her company in any cultural magazines except for those advertisements paid for by her manager. If Paquita is a charismatic Other, discussed by feminists, artists, politicians, housewives and the general public, then Francis is an offensive Other whom many go to see perform but few are willing to talk about.

In Francis' cabaret it is never clear when she is engaging in a characterization of her sexual subjectivity and when it is a matter of her performance personae. Francis confronts her audience in a vulgar manner. Continuing the tradition of the most popular albureros, Francis' show is based on nationalist and politically incorrect jokes. Theatrically speaking, this confrontation allows Francis to gain power through the intimidation of the audience by manipulating their homophobic fears. This can be seen in her comments to male spectators such as: "Have you not seen a fag before? Come on, come on, smile, and enjoy yourself." Besides this unexpected and rude behavior with the audience, Francis also has a quasi-fascist, conservative ideology that easily irritates almost all Mexican intellectuals, gay or not. Francis is particularly known for her hostility and criticism towards political associations that deal with gay issues. The result has been a very modest appreciation of her show among progressive gay circles in Mexico throughout the last 20 years. Nevertheless, the more Francis' show loses its approval by the leftist or non-repressive perspective, the more popular she becomes within the official Review Theater genre, which tends to support conservative agendas such as anti-gay legislation.

Due to Francis' genuine efforts to make her drag queen show visible and because the mainstream culture is unable to repress it in absolute terms, she has been able to negotiate a justifiable social space for herself and her performance. Nevertheless, Francis has had to change parts of her original transvestite show that were exclusionary of the heterosexual lifestyle. She did this to include her heterosexual audience, thereby maintaining her negotiated social performance space. However, large parts of the original show remain, such as Francis' subversive challenge to the field of macho symbolic representation. Francis often does this by making jokes, which assume her male audience has previously had homosexual experiences:

Ladies, do not get scared. My queens, beside my "big" words and dirty stories, what I am going to tell you is that there is nothing different or new here. And you, male soap opera stars, you calm down too. Relax babies, especially those of you in front of me. Maybe because you see that I have already begun to fuck some of you that are in the first row, you wet your pants and you are thinking: "what is this whore going to tell me now." Do not worry; I am not going to do anything you have not done before (García Escalante).

This strategy allows Francis to emphasize what, in her eyes, is a double standard. Her dramatic production points to how Mexican homophobic homosocialism may mask routine homoerotic practices. In this Mexican male scenario, homosocialism is very public: the cantina, the soccer field, the professional organization (e.g., army), the workplace, the privileged masculine space created at any social event. Homosocialism is primarily homophobic—or at least, speaks implicitly a discourse of homophobia—although it may shade off into private practices of homoeroticism: two men in the public space of the cantina get "homosocially" drunk and then in the private space of the bathroom or a hotel engage in homoerotic practices (Lumsden, Nuñez Noriega).

It is this sort of gender dynamics within Mexican culture that Francis wishes to call attention to and question. As a transvestite, Francis is able to take advantage of her position within the system of gender duality to strategically portray herself as sometimes a man and sometimes a woman in her cabaret jokes. On the cabaret stage, this switches between her masculine and

feminine roles, producing an alteration in the symbolic position of the passive homosexual within Mexican culture. As Francis herself has explained, were she merely “gay” she would not succeed as a performer. Francis has taken the flamboyant and rebellious social imaginary of the transvestite from within her culture and has manipulated it to develop a theatrical persona. This strategy of producing visibility inside the Mexican Review Theater genre is very significant when one takes into account the stigmatization of femininity as something invisible, weak, and fragile. Francis also uses this flashy transvestite dynamic to gain a voice; in doing so, she erupts into the masculine sphere.

Francis’ cabaret is a clearly queer scene in which heterosexual men can be in contact, theatrically speaking, with a feminine homosexual transvestite. In this way, what Francis achieves is paradoxical. On the one hand she reinforces the patriarchy underlining her jokes about gay stereotypes and misogynist views of women, and on the other hand she symbolically liberates the ambiguous, masculine homophobia that underlines the obsolete, normative categories of sexual differences. She also denounces the energies devoted toward the legitimacy of male bisexuality inside Mexican culture.

CONCLUSION

The main characteristic of Mexican cabaret, when compared to other theatrical genres, is its particular dedication to the immediate present. Each of the Mexican artists studied here dedicates her or his artwork to this immediacy. Cabaret is the theatre of great fallacies, dreams, and collective disappointments. It is the ontology of the immediate social and political present. Nevertheless, many consider the cabaret a “minor” theatrical genre. Therefore, one of our purposes in this essay is to argue the legitimacy of its emergence and integration into genuine postmodern Latin American culture. In doing so, we are not interested in erasing the stigma of cabaret’s position as an outsider. To the contrary, we wish to show that its main cultural energy, which is spent on producing new codes and rejuvenating old ones, comes precisely from its marginality from both the mainstream media and institutionalized theater. It is from its non-conformist understanding of culture that cabaret scrutinizes the hybridized political and sexual web of signs that builds the postmodern Mexican reality.

Hybridization is becoming one of the most influential processes in our globalized world. “Metropolis” and “Borders” are two of the spaces in which hybridization processes are most intense (García Canclini, 1998). Mexico City qualifies as both a metropolitan area and a border region; it is one of the largest cities in the world, and its global media culture generously blends with its popular and indigenous cultures and languages. The deterritorialization that is produced as a result has found its theatrical homeland in the hyper dramatic narrative of cabaret. Hadad, Paquita, Rodríguez, Vasconcelos, and Francis have rehabilitated their bodies as reterritorialized and hybrid scenic stages. Their particular focalization on the human physical self should be understood as a response to the progressive devaluation of more traditional forms of language. The present-day skepticism of traditional language in Mexican culture has produced a rift within the patriarchal theatrical community. Cabaret is a sign of this cultural fissure which process of emergence started in the 1980s and led to the genre’s legitimacy near the end of the 1990s. This process is unfinished, however, due to the queer, nonconformist and insubordinate nature of cabaret.

The devaluation of language is an issue not confined to Mexico and Latin America; it is part of a wider movement within Western theater that does not trust traditional canonical text as a faithful vehicle of expression of the contemporary human condition (Brecht, Ionesco, Artaud).

This process, which occurs within popular culture and theater, also initiates complex manifestations such as Paquita's refusal to introduce her songs or talk to the audience during her show. Nevertheless, this devaluation also has multifaceted implications that become clear when one studies Hadad's baroque carnality, Vasconcelos' Camp/Revista Theater, and Jesusa's political Cabaret. Because such Cabaret performers feel that contemporary theater's tools are not sufficient for expressing postmodern reality, they find their identities in the heritage of popular culture by revisiting the Teatro de Carpa and Musical Review Theater.

All the performers analyzed in this paper use their bodies and words as tools to showcase the tension within the social order. Consciously or unconsciously, all of them have faith in the contemporary Western theatrical belief of creating theater that serves one's own truth. Hadad, Rodríguez, and Vasconcelos recreate lesbian and gay bodies through combining the influences of underground Mexican tradition and Western culture; they do this as a way to question the official construction of gender, politics, and history. In the case of Paquita, this truth is related to the creation of a dissident space within Mexican popular love songs. Paquita represents a viable alternative role for women in popular culture, far from the stereotypically beautiful, submissive, and seductive female singers who abound in the Mexican mass media. By using techniques such as the naturalization of the transvestite body, Francis also incarnates a degree of interrogation of Mexican bisexual masculinity. As such examples illustrate, these artists' productions are expressions of the wide range of sexual representations a city as diverse and complex as Mexico City offers. Additionally, the diversity of their performances provides proof of the essentially hybrid and queer soul of the Mexican culture as a whole. Mexican cabaret as a dramatic text of the culture puts in crisis the traditional collective models of symbolization. Simultaneously, its unique position allows cabaret to propose alternatives to the uniform cultural production of subjectivities. In doing so, they call attention to the fragmentation and multiplicity of our reality, and especially to the need for non-dogmatic and queer perceptions of it.

(*) Francis died on October 10, 2007, after this article was written.

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