

Queering *mexicanidad* in Cabaret and Film: Redefining Boundaries of Belonging

By

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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Regardless of its geographical or historical context, cabaret breaks rules, challenges social norms and creates new performance models. Since taking root in Mexico at the beginning of the twentieth century, the genre has flourished by enabling artists to communicate socio-political critiques in overt and covert ways to their audiences. Moreover, it is a unique example of the nation's tolerance of dissident voices; artists have not faced violent oppression like in other Latin American countries such as Argentina or Chile. Motivated by a comment made by one of the artists in my dissertation, "que sea cabaret" (that it be cabaret), I consider the ramifications of the wide scope of performance styles that encompass contemporary Mexican cabaret. This conceptual and embodied fluidity, informs my assertion that the genre never disappeared from Mexico's stages, in contrast to current scholarship. Rather, I demonstrate that cabaret adapted and evolved to fit the changing needs of its audience and broader socio-cultural pressures in response to the rising popularity of film and its depictions of what it meant to be Mexican. To do this, I map a genealogy of performance by examining the choreographies of Tongolele, a dancing "mujer exótica" of the 1940s and 1950s, the work of Tito Vasconcelos,

known for his cross-dressing performances spanning from the 1970s to early 2000s, and the all-female theatre group, Las Reinas Chulas, current leaders of the cabaret community.

More than being connected via cabaret, my dissertation examines the artists' performances as expressions of dissident communication. Employing a framework that blends literary analysis with Performance Theory, Queer and Gender Studies, Dance, Ethnomusicology and Film Studies, I focus on how Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas use music, dance and drag aesthetics to challenge deeply entrenched definitions of *mexicanidad*, proliferated by Mexico's Golden Age Cinema (1930-1960) and its on-screen idols. While drag is most commonly associated with gender representations, my use also includes expressions of temporal and racial drag that can be read through the sonic and embodied cues. These three forms of drag are used as ways of questioning not just identity constructions, but also the way the body exists in relation to the space and time within which the performances occur. As such, the artists in this dissertation queer, subvert and re-configure expectations of heteronormativity, the whitened mestizo physique and male/female gender binaries associated with *mexicanidad*. In doing so, they propose alternative definitions of what it means to be Mexican. Although cabaret has often been marginalized in favor of mainstream cultural productions, like film, it is precisely its peripheral nature that affords these artists the creative means to enact more tolerant visions of the sexual, racial and gender spectrums that exist within Mexico's borders.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Introduction: ¡Que sea cabaret!	1
Queer Acts of Subversion	4
Historical Developments:	7
<i>Cabaret in Mexico</i>	7
<i>Mexican Cinema</i>	11
<i>Teatro-Cabaret</i>	19
Film Theory and Queer Gazing	27
Queer Theory	30
Drag Forms: Gender, Time and Race	33
<i>Gender</i>	34
<i>Time</i>	36
<i>Race</i>	37
Chapter Summaries	39
Chapter 1: Tongolele, <i>mujer exótica</i>: Embodying and Queering Discourses of Femininity, Race and Exoticism.	43
Tongolele: From a Lineage of Unsettling Women	44
From the Stage to Big Screen	49
Las rumberas: Constructing Sexualized Female “Others”	55
Las mujeres exóticas: Constructing “Otherness”	63
Tongolele’s Performances of “Otherness”	67
<i>El Rey del barrio</i> (1949)	73
Performing and Possessing Memory	74
Segregating Musical and Racial Scripts	78
Rupturing and Subverting Heteronormative Gazes	80
<i>Han Matado a Tongolele</i> (1948)	83
Performing Tongolele’s Mysterious Origins	86
Dancing Queer Time, Space and Race	89
Musical Interpretations of “Otherness”	93
From Exotic Sounds to Erotic Visions	95
Conclusion	99
Chapter 2: Tra(n)s el tiempo: Tito Vasconcelos’ Queer Temporality, Drag Transformations and Musical Interventions	102
Theorizing Queer Time, Gender and Sounds	105
Vasconcelos and Mexico’s <i>revista</i> and <i>carpa</i> Traditions	113
<i>Cabareteras</i> and <i>Ficheras</i> : Vasconcelos’ Oppositional Gaze	116
<i>Danzón</i> (1991)	122
Susy: Visually and Musically Dragging the <i>cabaretera</i>	123

Susy and Spectator's Oppositional Gaze	132
Vasconcelos' Opposition and Disidentification through Susy	134
<i>Martita, Primera Dama</i> (2001)	136
Female Impersonation or Theatre?	138
In "Her" Own Words: Marta's Story	140
Ladies and Gentlemen, a Version of Lucha Reyes	145
Conclusion	156

Chapter 3: Las Reinas Chulas Revise Mexico's Golden Age: Queer Orientations and Re-Presentations in *Nosotras las proles* 158

Las Reinas Chulas: An Introduction	161
Las Reinas Chulas' Turn to <i>carpa</i> and <i>revista</i>	164
<i>Nosotras las proles</i> (2013): Re-Imagining the Classics	167
Temporal Re-Orientation: Binding, Cyclical and Repeating Time	172
Pedro Infante: Quintessential Figure of Mexican Melodrama	180
Absenting Pedro Infante: Re-Envisioning The Melodramatic Family Unit	184
Performing Female Masculinities: The <i>charro</i> Re-make	192
Queering the <i>charro</i> Sound	198
Brown and Blackface Drag: Subverting Racial Tropes	201
Audience Reaction	213
Conclusion	216

Concluding Remarks: The Show Must Go On 218

Bibliography 222

Introduction: ¡Que sea cabaret!

Regardless of its geographical or historical context, cabaret is rebellious; it breaks rules, challenges social norms and creates new performance models. Throughout its history, the space of the cabaret has served as a laboratory where artists work through subversive and satirical ideas (Appignanesi 5). These rebellious and subversive qualities became crystal clear to me while attending the 11th Annual International Cabaret Festival in Mexico City in August 2013. During this festival I saw many cabaret forms represented; the event joined clowns, striptease, musical reviews, and satirical theatre. When I spoke with organizer and performer Ana Francis Mor about how performances were selected for the festival, she said the only requirement was “que sea cabaret.” What struck me about this comment is the way it guides the festival’s organization, and yet, is vague about what exactly cabaret is. This statement also seems to signal the way cabaret facilitates a linguistic, conceptual and practiced connection between varied artistic styles, rather than an attempt to compartmentalize them and isolate performance models. While the fluidity in the term *cabaret* presents the challenge of understanding the spatial and artistic expectations of past and present practices, I propose that this fluidity will shed light on the shared similarities of Mexican cabaret styles over the last century. This dissertation employs Mor’s broad definition of cabaret along with its subversive potential to examine different spaces, performers, and performance styles that have not otherwise been considered together.

At stake in this dissertation’s approach is an attempt to fill scholarly voids on the topic of cabaret in Mexico. My project utilizes cabaret as a way to situate people, practices and spaces that have not otherwise been considered together. In doing this, first, I am arguing against the ideas of decline and disappearance, as suggested by scholars such as Sonia León, Armando María y Campos and Socorro Merlín, all of whom contend that the popularity of sound cinema

and radio starting in the 1930s caused cabaret forms to all but disappear in Mexico City by the 1940s.¹ Others, like Gastón Alzate and Laura Gutiérrez writing on cabaret trends in Mexico since the 1980s, suggest a revival of performance forms of the past, emphasizing further this void in cabaret's history. These two scholars explore how contemporary *teatro-cabaret* developed out of earlier Mexican theatre forms, but are uncritical of why *teatro-cabaret* invokes the term cabaret at all. It is within these historical and conceptual vacancies that I interrogate the bonds between cabaret styles, suggesting that Mexican cabaret forms have remained vital to the capital city, adapting to fit changing socio-cultural needs from the emergence of film to the present.

A relevant consideration for this project is how the term cabaret is related to a series of artistic practices that were and are linked to the spaces within which performances occur. According to Mexican scholar Armando Jiménez, while cabaret has a very clear meaning in other countries, this was not the case in Mexico City during the first half of the twentieth century since it includes performance in “clubes, y centros nocturnos, discotecas y en general lugares de paga donde se baila, hay música, espectáculos y se consumen licores” (Jiménez, *Cabarets* 9). While this observation of cabaret's spatial and performative openness may not actually be unique to Mexico, it is interesting to note that Jiménez asserts that there is, in fact, something different about Mexico City cabaret: fluidity. It is this fluidity that Ana Francis Mor echoes several decades later in her statement, “que sea cabaret,” insinuating that there is no single definition of this performance style or space. These two observations function to support the way I make connections between the diverse spaces and approaches to performances considered throughout this dissertation. Specifically, as Jiménez and Mor's comments suggest, Mexico City's cabaret

¹ See León 2012; María y Campos 1956; Merlín 1995.

can be defined as inclusive of, but not limited to, theatre, dance, music, circus acts, cross-dressing and comedians.

The artistic endeavors and practices that Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas engage in to produce new meanings of *mexicanidad* are rooted in the intersections between dance, music and cinema, all performed on the cabaret stage. Each of the artists considered in this dissertation use images, sounds and movements associated with *mexicanidad*, and more specifically, expectations of heteronormativity, the whitened mestizo physique and male/female gender binaries.² As such, the audio-visual mechanisms function to transmit subversive content in a way that goes beyond linguistic or textual expressions. I have chosen these elements because they have been overlooked or underdeveloped in current scholarship on cabaret styles in Mexico. For example, Laura Guitérrez positions her work as an examination of how gender and sexual representations on the cabaret (and transnational) stage are intimately related to public discourses about censorship and control over bodies. Despite Guitérrez's interest in challenging heteronormative gender and sexual norms via "parodic mimicry" and "wordplay tactics" (7), her book exclusively focuses on biologically female performers, leaving out the way men are also active participants in this endeavor. In contrast, Gastón Alzate reflects on the approaches of several male and female artists to cabaret performance and because he is interested in this plurality of aesthetic and personal contributions to cabaret, he includes gender and sexuality among a broad list of strategies artists use such as humor, wordplay, dramatic fragmentation, sketches, improvisation, as conduits to filter socio-political critiques. As a whole,

² My examination of the *mexicanidad* is limited to the notion of light-skinned body, heteronormative expectations and gender binaries. This is, however, just one approach to examining definitions of what it means to be Mexican. In his seminal work, *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz explores characteristics of "lo mexicano" whereas contemporaries such as José Revueltas and Carlos Fuentes, followed by Roger Barta, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla in the 1980s and 1990s, pick apart the notion of inherent qualities as well as propose the idea that works, such as Paz's were artificial myths of "lo mexicano," which bear little resemblance to the lived reality of Mexicans. See Paz, 1952; Revueltas, 1958; Fuentes, 1958; Barta 1987; Bonfil Batalla 1992.

though, these two scholars emphasize the importance of textual and linguistic means of expressing discontent.

Expanding upon this scholarship, my project proposes a new approach to exploring cabaret and its evolution over the last century in Mexico City. For a deeper understanding of cabaret's subversive socio-political critiques of Mexico's national politics, racial configurations, gendered expectations and exclusive definitions of belonging, I interrogate queer renderings of musical, dance and cinematic elements in the performance style of Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas. To do this, I detail the development of contemporary cabaret forms as part of a genealogy, highlighting connections between present and past forms of theatre as well as the performative bonds between theatre, cabaret and Mexican Golden Age Cinema. Hence, my project utilizes cabaret not just to connect the aforementioned performers, but also historical performative movements: twentieth century *Teatro de carpa* and *Teatro de revista* theatre styles, Mexican Golden Age Cinema, the provocative dancing *mujeres exóticas* of the 1940s and 1950s, politically engaged transvestite theatre of the 1970s and 1980s, and contemporary *teatro-cabaret*.

Queer Acts of Subversion

The spatial and performative qualities of cabaret link all of the performers being considered in this study, but what serves as the underlying connection between them is the element of subversion facilitated by and through this particular mode of performance. What I mean by the term subversion is the way Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas utilize performative tools to unsettle normative expectations of gender, race and historical moments of the past and present. These artists use cabaret to engage with and challenge how these expectations guide the totalizing narratives of Mexican identity, or *mexicanidad*, made

pervasive by Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema. And yet, these artists don't perform just any kind of subversion, but rather, what I call queer acts of subversion.

Before I delve into what I mean by queer acts of subversion, I first need to unpack the term queer. All of Las Reinas Chulas and Tito Vasconcelos are self-identifying homosexual beings, while Tongolele is a heterosexual female that claims an identity other than her own, complicating an overarching connection based on sexuality. Hence, my use of queer has little to do with their private lives. Rather, I use the term queer as a way of exploring the ways in which these artists challenge expectations by means of being different and by performing difference. From this notion of difference, part of the very definition of queer, I define my use of the term based on the following: (1) Artistic endeavors intimately informed by daily lived experiences, including but not limited to, those linked to gender and/or sexual orientation; (2) Engaging in performative practices that produce new understandings and possibilities of belonging; (3) Utilizing their position on the margins as a way of carrying out their critiques of the pervasive notions of and politics associated with *mexicanidad*.

The first two elements can be considered together as the inspiration for Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas' performative work is intimately linked to re-imagining the characteristics that have come to define *mexicanidad*. My definition of queer and interest in how artists are influenced by their lived experiences are indebted to the work of Alzate. In his exploration of contemporary *teatro-cabaret* artists, Alzate pays careful attention to the way artists are motivated to create works that channel their frustrations with and criticisms of Mexico's *status quo*. Much like Alzate, I concentrate on how many of these motivating experiences are linked to sexual preferences and gender, but do not rest exclusively upon them. Hence, my interest is in the ways Tito Vasconcelos, Las Reinas Chulas and Tongolele articulate,

through performance, their responses to the adversity, discrimination and exclusion they experience as non-heteronormative or vulnerable gendered bodies. What occurs, then, is that cabaret provides these artists with a medium through which they push back and against expectations. For example, every time Tongolele refuses the advances of a male suitor or sustains the gaze of female audience members, she creates fissures and ruptures in a system that prescribes appropriate models of feminine behavior and heterosexual desire. As Tito Vasconcelos transforms his masculine body into a one that resembles the *rumbera* vixens of the past or Mexico's First Lady, he exposes the fragility of these iconic females by dismantling the construction of gender. When Las Reinas Chulas re-write one of Mexico's most successful films, *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), by absenting the lead male character, they subsequently destabilize the foundation of cinematic history as well as its representation of family and masculinity. Embedded within these unruly and subversive acts is the possibility of creating a new way of being, belonging, and ultimately, a new kind of *mexicanidad*. Their performing of this different and queered vision, combined with its subversive potential, allows me to arrive at the notion of queer acts of subversion.

The last element of marginality is important for situating the work of each of the artists within this notion of queer acts of subversion. To begin, the space of the cabaret is, in and of itself, a site that is not generally considered part of "high culture," but rather, on the margins. In this dissertation, broadly speaking, the cabarets under consideration exist in a metaphorical and/or literal space of relative liminality. For example, both Vasconcelos and Tongolele's stages appear in cinematic renderings of cabarets, but lack names or geographical markers to ground them within a tangible landscape. Las Reinas Chulas's cabaret performances take place outside the center of Mexico City, on the periphery of more widely acknowledged theatre culture. In

addition to this kind of cultural and geographical marginality, what interests me is that while all of these artists are, to some degree, well known, I would not describe any as particularly famous. Although they have all appeared in one or more of the following: television programming, YouTube, radio and film, these artists are overshadowed by more household names like Ninón Sevilla or Astrid Hadad. While I cannot speak for the artists themselves, a comment Tito Vasconcelos made in a 1991 interview about his role in *Danzón* is particularly adept at pointing to the importance of marginality: “I’ve always been on the margin of official culture. Sometimes I hate it, but if I wasn’t marginalized, I wouldn’t be doing what I want to do” (Lida, “Activist” 101). I read this statement as an indication of Vasconcelos’ identification as a gay man, gay rights activist and gay performer within a nation that is reticent to acknowledge non-heteronormative bodies. Las Reinas Chulas, as four self-identifying lesbian artists, feminists and activists, would also find themselves part of this outsider status. Finally, Tongolele, though a heterosexual woman, is a foreign body on the stages of Mexico City; she is an American-born dancer who fashions her image to fit a specific kind of femininity. It is precisely this existence on the outside of “official culture” that allows Vasconcelos, Las Reinas Chulas and Tongolele to perform the kind of subversive work they do.

Historical Developments

Cabaret in Mexico

To more deeply explore the centrality of dance, music and cinema within Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas’ queer acts of subversion, it is first important to understand how European cabaret forms took root and flourished in Mexico City in ways they did not anywhere else in Mexico, or Latin America for that matter. Emerging in the late 1880s, cabaret contributed to the cultural fabric of not only early twentieth century France, but also Germany,

Great Britain and the United States. Moreover, the term cabaret conjures up different images depending on the context within which it is being discussed, such as the Moulin Rouge in France or Liza Minelli in the United States. Yet, as Lisa Appignanesi states, “what remains more or less consistent in cabaret and allows it to be defined as a distinct form, are its structural elements: a small stage and smallish audience and an ambience of talk and smoke” (6). This model of cabaret developed out of a series of artistic and spatial transformations during eighteenth and nineteenth century Paris: first from the French “bistro or café with its solitary singer” (Appignanesi 5), then into a café-concert or musical hall with dance and musical numbers, and finally into cabaret with the incorporation of the satirical or protest songs. As Socorro Merlín explains, this model of cabaret, with its satirical social commentaries was also referred to as a revue for the way in which it “*hacía reseñas paródicas con canto, prosa y música de los acontecimientos del año*” (14). This devotion to a topical nature, coupled with the performers’ “witty repartee between performers and audience” (Appignanesi 6) is part of what led to cabaret’s growing popularity in France and exportation to other European nations during the second half of the nineteenth century. According to Merlín, this French cabaret model “*pasó con sus bailes y cantos a ser parte de los espectáculos españoles, con los contenidos y temas de una reseña del año a que correspondiera la revista, como la primera que tuvo lugar en el año de 1844*” (14). It is this connection between the French revue and Spanish performative models that establish cabaret’s arrival in Mexico.

Known for using a variety of performance tools such as comedic sketches, dance numbers, music, stereotypical characters, and popular language, all perhaps connected by a plot or organized as individual sketches, cabaret’s qualities also characterize Mexico’s *teatro de carpa* and *teatro de revista*. As Armando María y Campos, Sonia León and Merlín suggest, the

early twentieth century *teatro de revista* emerged out of cabaret-inspired forms of Spanish theatre, such as the opera, zarzuela and sainete and “género chico.” María y Campos details that after the 1868 Spanish revolution a more politically engaged theatre emerged, combining socio-political critiques, music and theatre. Brought into the Mexican context, this “género chico” profoundly impacted the sonic qualities and content that evolved into Mexico’s own “género chico político,” alternatively called, *teatro de revista* (María y Campos, *Género chico* 23). As Sonia León explains, part of what facilitated *revista*’s popularity within Mexico, and specifically the capital city, was the shortened performance time. She states that this “género chico” was a prime example of a “sistema de funciones ‘por horas’, para representar obras cortas de duración aproximada de una hora, bien ‘de verso’, bien líricas, lo que permitiría dar cuatro sesiones en el tiempo que los teatros de función completa daban una” (León 2012). In opposition to the more “traditional” theatre and performance genres such as the Spanish opera, *revista* audiences had the option of seeing multiple performances in a night (Morales 2005; María y Campos 1989; León 2012).

This description of the Mexican *revista* could also be applied to one of its contemporaries, *teatro de carpa*. According to Merlín’s work on *carpa*, though distinct from *revista*, the two share much in common including performers, structure, and performance spaces. However, *carpa*’s concurrent evolution with *revista* comes from a different origin: the circus. Merlín details, the first circuses arrived to Mexico in 1790 and “con el circo vienen payasos y toda clase de equilibristas, magos y equitadores, que exaltan la imaginación y el deseo de lanzarse a las pistas de nuestros propios maromeros, graciosos y contorsionistas” (12). These body-centric performative repertoires would profoundly shape the kind of character types, humor and emphasis on the body so characteristic of *carpa*. In addition, the circus often traveling along

the outskirts of Mexico City, was afforded great mobility based on their tent structure. This existence outside the urban center of Mexico City, coupled with short-term, mobile tent structures would also come to characterize the majority of *carpa* performance spaces at the turn of the twentieth century. Ultimately, the economic element and embodied approaches of both *carpa* and *revista* performances created a connection between the performer and the audience in a way that “traditional genres” did not. In contrast to Spanish-content and language used in many early twentieth century pieces, *carpa* and *revista*’s incorporation of popular language and stereotypical characters was more relatable for a wider public (Monisvais 1981). This ability to relate, as well as the financial accessibility led to *carpa* and *revista*’s lasting popularity in the capital city.

The popularity of *carpa* and *revista* traditions can also be attributed to their ability to connect with their audiences, to make the content relevant for the spectators. Much like the intimate environment of the cabaret, “where the relationship between performer and spectator is one of both intimacy and hostility” (Appignanesi 6), both *carpa* and *revista* experienced similar bonds between audience and performer. In terms of intimacy, the physical proximity between performers and spectators at *revista* and *carpa* productions collapsed the space between the bodies, often creating a blurred sensation of who is performing and who is watching. This is particularly relevant, because as Gutiérrez explains, “*revistas* and *carpas* were the first artistic performance format in which popular classes were able to find themselves reflected, a phenomenon that would later be reproduced by the incipient film industry” (82). She goes on to explain that part of what made this on-stage reflection possible were the representations of Mexican archetypes, and more specifically, “the emergences of popular types along with a new language that was more popular, urban and ‘vulgar’” (82). Turning to the idea of hostility, these

urban popular characters came to embody the possibilities for theatre to channel external struggles such as those experienced by the marginalized and disillusioned poor struggling to survive. Speaking broadly of *carpa* and *revista* during the Revolutionary period, Merlín expands upon these levels of communication, suggesting that “el teatro ofrecía entonces varios niveles de comunicación: el de la escena con el público, el de la escena con los revolucionarios, el del público con éstos y el de los revolucionarios entre sí” (3). This observation exposes theatre’s ability to extend beyond the confines of the performance space and time. It also signals how the early performative style and content of *carpa* and *revista* rested upon intimate engagement with and understanding of the outside world.

One final important factor that contributed to the success of *carpa* and *revista* productions was the Mexican Revolution, as this national upheaval provided the performers and writers with plenty of material. Finding inspiration in Revolutionary figures, battles and political traitors, *carpa* and *revista* productions laid the foundation for astute political satire that would come to define contemporary *teatro-cabaret*. Moreover, during this time of crisis, these theatre forms provided an outlet for their audience to, on one hand, temporarily escape the devastating reality of violence and uncertainty that surrounded them. On the other hand, audiences and performers alike were able to partake in imaging alternative experiences via their re-presentation of national events and political players. Yet, as the Revolution came to a close in the 1920s, coupled with the rise and popularity of sound cinema in the 1930s, *carpa* and *revista* scholars widely regard this historical moment as the downfall of their presence in the capital city. Without material or audience members, León, María y Campos and Merlín suggest *carpa* and *revista* first became de-politicized, and then, faded into the background, overshadowed by the silver screen.

However, *carpa* and *revista*'s influence over cinematic conventions and with the appearance of popular stage actors on the silver screen, these theatre styles did not truly disappear.

Mexican Cinema

Similar to the way extreme socio-political upheavals shaped the development of *carpa*, *revista* and *teatro-cabaret*, the same holds true for Mexico's film industry. Examining film as one of sociocultural changes that occurred post-Revolution, historian Arthur Schmidt suggests it "offer(s) important markers for understanding the historical fabric of life in post-1940 Mexico" (49). During this post-war life, cinema was one of the tools that the government utilized to perpetuate and proliferate its vision for the future of the nation; film was a cultural project³ conceived as a means for consolidating the divided nation under a new understanding of *mexicanidad*. The power of film to convey these narratives in the Mexican context bears with it the added context of state supported agendas in the aftermath of the nation's Revolution. As film scholar Joanne Herschfield explains, "the political and cultural revisioning of national identity coincided with the development of the vibrant cinema industry" ("Race" 82). The popularity of film points to the importance of visual imagery to consecrate the updated version of *mexicanidad*. This is, in large part, due to the fact that literacy rates in Mexico were low. Hence, the state utilized visually based tactics in order to reach and indoctrinate the large population of uneducated citizens. As Carlos Monsiváis explains, this new industry was actually "for the public, who, among other things, trusted that its idols would explain how to survive in a bewildering age of modernisation. At weekends, families went to the cinema to find and experience entertainment, family unity, honour, 'permissible sexuality'" ("Mythologies" 117).

³ Along with film, the muralist movement was another project supported by the government. See Ades 1989; Anreus, 2012; Blanco Cano 2010, pp.8.

The representations and understandings of the very essence of *mexicanidad* projected on the big screen were overwhelmingly inspired by the ideas of José Vasconcelos. As Secretary of Public Education, Vasconcelos sought to bring the nation together by means of educational reforms and cultural projects, such as film and even the muralist movement. At the heart of Vasconcelos' vision was his belief that for the nation to move forward it needed to create a new race of beings, what he called *la raza cósmica*. Published in 1925, on the heels of the Revolution, *La raza cósmica* conceived a new race that combined all of the previous races into one powerful being: the very essence of *mexicanidad*. Simultaneously suggesting that Mexico's indigenous past be respected and valorized, Vasconcelos' *raza cósmica* was also racist; emphasizing the need to mix indigenous with European blood reveals Vasconcelos' desire to whiten the nation. This element of Vasconcelos' framework, while informed by contemporary eugenic ideas, also points to a long-standing racist mentality specific to the Americas. Within the Mexican context, and Latin America more broadly, these ideas have historically aligned light skin tones with civilization whereas darker bodies have been considered as more barbarous beings, beings needed to be eliminated or in some way subdued. As Anita González explains, another layer of racist rhetoric complicates the popularity of Vasconcelos' ideas within Mexico; "this construction obscures the presence of African, Asian, and other populations that have contributed to the growth of the nation" (1). With the support of the state, these racist ideas have become deeply entrenched in Mexican popular thought, even continuing into the present.

Beyond the ramifications of Vasconcelos' ideological construction of *mexicanidad*, the government played a fundamental role in shaping the development and content first projected on Mexico's silver screens. With sound technology really coming into its own by the 1930s, the success of Mexico's "talkies" is indebted to the benefactor policies of Lázaro Cárdenas. It is

outside the scope of this work to provide an in-depth history of Mexican political history, but it is worth noting that unlike his predecessors, and many after him, President Lázaro Cárdenas sought to rebuild the nation by supporting and protecting national industry, by respecting Mexico's 1917 Constitution. With the financial support of the state, Mexican cinema not only grew quickly, but also had access to some of the best equipment of the time. With legal support, companies such as Cinematográfica Latinoamericana S.A. flourished and workers were protected by unions such as Unión de Trabajadores de Estudios Cinematográficos de México (UTECE) (Mora 28-50). The result of this seemingly positive connection between the state and cultural industry was the sudden influx of quality films that not only appealed to the Spanish-language markets, but also to the Mexican public as they saw themselves and their histories reflected on-screen. Now able to compete with both Hollywood⁴ and Argentina's⁵ film industries, Mexico would soon lead the way in foreign film production between 1930-1960, what is known as Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema

Like *carpa* and *revista*, the Revolution itself provided the film industry with content and motivation for its earliest productions. For example, the earliest productions, such as *Janitzio* (1935), *Redes* (1936) and *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (1935) sought to explore the not-so-distant events and figures of the revolutionary period. *Vámonos con Pancho Villa* (1935), for example, "is a remarkable film which looks back on the still recent events that constituted a traumatic part of the lives of most Mexicans of the time, and coldly demythologizes them" (Mora 45). These cinematic endeavors, then, more than projecting hagiographic representations of the Revolution sought to critique and expose it for the divisive and agonizing event that it was. Mexico's earliest films sought to use this new cultural medium to bridge the gap between urban and rural bodies,

⁴ See Monsiváis y Bonfil 1994; Mora 2005; García Canclini 2001; Fein 2001

⁵ See López 1991; López 1994.

which post-Revolution, found themselves in contact due to internal migration trends. As one of the first (and most popular) depictions of rural life, *Allá en el rancho grande* (1936) “is a good example of what Carlos Monsiváis describes as the development by the Mexican establishment of an 'official' yet spurious folklore which has been useful not only in attracting tourism but, more importantly, in blurring regional differences so as to create a more integrated society” (Mora 47). On the other hand, films like *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), offered an idealized vision of what life was like for the urban poor. As the quintessential representation of popular language, urban archetypes and melodramatic plotlines, the film influenced generations into believing, “con alegría llorosa...el vestuario, las costumbres, el gozo de vivir sin privacidad, el tono de voz canturreado, y el habla carente de refinamiento, alejada de cualquier pretensión” (Monsiváis, *Espejo* 148).

Though the Revolution played a fundamental role in early films, the foundations for archetypal Mexican characters, cinematic structures and plots were also deeply informed by *carpa* and *revista* traditions. For example, in *Allá en el rancho grande* and *Nosotros los pobres*, the very sketch-like structure of the film is reminiscent of *carpa* or later *revista* productions. More importantly, many *carpa* and *revista* stars like Cantinflas, Tin Tán, María Conesa, Tongolele and many others were recruited to appear in films. This was, in part, due to the fact that as many theatre venues turned into movie houses at the rising public demand to watch films, many actors found themselves without places to perform. On the other hand, this was a strategic decision. Carlos Bonfil states, with cinema’s growing popularity, “surge la opción de un star system nacional que favorece la familiaridad del público con sus estrellas” (22). As these ‘stars’ had already garnered public appreciation and fans, their transition to the big screen was meant to secure their popularity, as well as that of the film itself. Moreover, with their transition from the

stage to the screen, these stars brought with them the characters that made them famous. For example, Cantinflas' *peladito* character and comedic speech patterns or Amelia Wilhemy's drunken, urban female character, "La guayaba," crystallizing the popularity of these archetypes on the silver screen.

To expand upon the sketch-like qualities of *carpa* and *revista* that informed Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema, I want to focus on the role of music and dance. Music, as part of these early theatre forms, cabaret and cinema functioned as a useful tool to forge connections between an audience, performers and the performance. In his book, *Los sonidos de la nación moderna*, for example, Alejandro Madrid evaluates music in the post-revolutionary period of 1920-1950 as creating an aural expression of *mexicanidad*. Adding to critical conversations about this period of shaping the nation and to my brief overview of how these notions of *mexicanidad* were connected to film, Madrid explains, "mi objetivo de estudio no es la música ni el estilo musical *per se*, sino la música como un proceso que es moldeado, pero que también moldea su contexto cultural" (*Los sonidos* 11). An example of this is Augustín Lara. As one of the musical pioneers who fused the Cuban style of *danzón* performance with Mexico's romantic song tradition, Lara gave rise to a distinctly Mexican form of the *bolero* (Moore, *Music* 130). Not only a rising star in the *revista*, *carpa* and cabaret communities, Lara also transitioned to Mexico's cinematic world, again becoming one of the foremost musical composers. As Mark Pedelty suggests, "just as the shows in earlier "Review Theatre" were based on bolero song titles, so too, many of the cabaret-era films entitled and developed around bolero themes. Lara's film inspirations included: 'Aventurera,' 'Palabras de Mujer,' 'Pecadora,' and many others" (41). Yet, the *bolero* was not the only significant musical development during this period; other afro-cuban rhythms, the *ranchera* sound and mariachi trio were made increasingly popular through radio and cinematic diffusion.

The rise of *rumberas*, emphatic *ranchera* vocals and the iconic male mariachi trio in the *charro* outfit are revelatory of how musical components, performed first on stage and later on screen, determined sonically-based understandings of what *mexicanidad* sounded like.

In addition to music, dance was an integral element for the later *revista* productions, body-centric *carpa* style, and of course, cabaret spaces. During the post-Revolutionary period, the *revista* was no longer a source of political critiques and information, but rather, “durante el año 1926 el teatro político – o revolucionario en general sufrió un colapso” (María y Campos, *Género chico* 297). As a result of more provocative and popular dance *revistas*, such as the arrival of the Parisian Bataclán, *revista*’s transformation “había tomado el carácter de vodevil y posteriormente se transformaría en lo que hasta nuestros días se identifica como espectáculos de cabaret” (León). The ramifications of this shifting style of performance, intimately linked to the body is the way movement, became another tool for establishing notions of *mexicanidad*. Moreover, that many of these dancing bodies were female, points to important gendered divisions that I develop throughout my chapters. Dance itself, as Susan Leigh Foster explains, is “a cultural practice that cultivates disciplined and creative bodies, as a representational practice that explores rigorously strategies for developing bodily signification” (*Corporealities* xiii). Applying this notion to the Mexican context, the rise of the *china poblana*, *mujeres exóticas* and *rumberas*, just to name a few, are apt examples for demonstrating how the body is fruitful site of exploration into movement-based expressions of histories, gender and nationalism. At the same time, shifting from the stage to the screen, these dancing bodies were subjected to a “set of regimented requisites” (Foster, *Choreographing* 12) that emphasized a kind of bodily signification encased within the state-controlled notions of acceptable *mexicanidad*.

A final aspect of my consideration of Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema is the way filmic

adaptations of *carpa*, *revista* and cabaret became imbued with a melodramatic twist. While Peter Brooks and Thomas Elsaesser's arguments about the when and where melodrama emerged are distinct, these two seminal voices in the study of melodrama come to the same conclusion: melodrama's development is inextricably linked to external social and political moments of crisis. Brooks' point of reference is "almost exclusively 'classic' French melodrama as it came to be established at the dawn of the nineteenth century – in the aftermath of the Revolution – and as it endured" (*Melodramatic Imagination* xii), while Elsaesser focuses on European medieval plays through twentieth-century American cinema, claiming melodrama's popularity "seems to coincide (and this remains true throughout the 19th century) with periods of intense social and ideological crisis" (70). These arguments link external crises to emotional responses, together functioning as a way of coming to terms with and understanding social change (Elsaesser 72). Shifting the context to Mexico, the performative dialogue between external events and their transmission through theatre and filmic works remains true. Focusing on Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema, Ana López elucidates that one of the basic melodramatic tendencies between 1930 and 1960 was "los melodramas épicos, que utilizaban la historia nacional, sobre todo los sucesos de la Revolución mexicana" (*Hollywood* 89). This observation connects melodramatic productions with the undeniably transformative Mexican Revolution. It is not my intention to consider Golden Age films that depicted revolutionary events or their notable figures. Nor is it my intention to provide a summary of the Revolution's major events. Rather, at stake in referencing the Revolution is the way that it represents the social, cultural and political upheavals that fall within Brooks and Elsaesser's definition of moments of crises.

The melodramatic character of Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema reflects its understandings of traumatic events of the past as well as the inherently melodramatic Mexican

life, as Carlos Monsiváis proclaims: “sólo en el desbordamiento el melodrama mexicano se reconoce. Una actuación contenida no se considera actuación, así de simple, porque el mundo representable es el de la Naturaleza Humana que es la devastación perpetua” (*Espejo* 152).

Transposing this notion of Mexican experiences onto film, the result is a kind of melodrama that, supported by the state, was one that sought to inculcate its viewers not just with patriotic values, but also with a strong moral code. In addition to this didactic quality of melodrama, these films triggered the audience’s identification with moral divisions of good and bad; “y el “prestigio íntimo” (del melodrama), en ese contexto, tiene que ver con la sensación de estar allí, en la butaca, defendiendo valores sagrados: el amor a la patria, a la madre, a la familia, a los hijos, a la honra, a la identidad personal” (Monsiváis, *Espejo* 125). As a result, this sense of seeing oneself through the lens of melodramatic action has cemented these Golden Age films within popular cultural memory of the past and present. Replayed on local Televisa channels, the stars, plot lines and sounds of this era are readily accessible and constantly repeated in Mexican households so that even those separated generationally from this period have grown up seeing and hearing idols of Mexican culture. In this sense, the films and melodramas of the past have shaped notions of morality, the family and gender associated with *mexicanidad* for over half a century.

Teatro-Cabaret

Emerging in the 1980s, *teatro-cabaret* has often been considered and referred to as a revival of *carpa* and *revista* theatre. Sharing a context of crisis and uncertainty with these twentieth-century predecessors, as well as cinema productions, *teatro-cabaret* appeared on stages throughout Mexico City amidst unsettling events such as the earthquake that shook the capital city to its core and the nation’s broader economic collapse. During this particular historical moment, *cabaretera* Jesusa Rodríguez explained, “we’re in such a profound crisis, and cabaret

always flourishes in crisis--remember the Nazis, how cabaret boomed then? In Mexico, we're in an impossible spectacle, beyond Ibsen or the absurd. We're in a kind of perverse fiction” (Obejas 8). Much as *carpa* and *revista* used external events as the basis for their satire and sharp critiques, *teatro-cabaret* too looks to the seemingly absurd events for inspiration. Moreover, like its predecessors, *teatro-cabaret* began to flourish precisely because performers no longer found that existing performance models allowed them to address their current socio-economic and political interests.

It is easy to perceive the similarities *teatro-cabaret* shares with *carpa* and *revista* as it also uses theatre as an informative tool, combined with its use of satire, socio-political critiques and sketch-like format (Gutiérrez 2010; Alzate 2002; Taylor 1992). By using music, humor, dance, popular characters and theatre conventions, *teatro-cabaret* reinvigorates the performative styles of the past while imbuing them with a contemporary sensibility of the needs and failures of modern Mexico. As Rodríguez explains, “the media in Mexico is controlled by the government, which everyone knows is corrupt, so you can't believe what you read in the newspapers, what you hear on radio or see on TV” (Obejas 8), forcing *teatro-cabaret* to exist as an autonomous cultural production. In this sense, much like the theatre forms of the past, *teatro-cabaret* exists outside of government-supported, or official, theatre practices as well as geographically outside Mexico City's center. This marginality, however, has not stifled the genre, but rather, has allowed it and its performers a certain freedom to pose questions, concerns and critiques of nation such as political transparency, human rights, and most recently, narco-related abuses.

Teatro-cabaret, of course, did not appear out of thin air. Rather, several artists made its evolution possible; dissatisfied with the world around them, they sought to offer alternatives. At the same time, their performative interests and goals did not match up with existing theatre

practices, prompting them to create a style that did meet their needs. The notable cabareter@s that embarked upon this effort to revive the theatre styles of the past, though with a difference, are Jesusa Rodriguez, Liliana Felipe, Astrid Hadad and Tito Vasconcelos. Part of the central mission for *teatro-cabaret* and its performers has been to rework popular culture, history and traditions in a way that facilitates socio-conscious content blended with satire and humor. In this sense, the kind of theatre and cabaret these artists have created is one that has simultaneously turned towards and away from accepted models of performance; a kind of queer performative project. Moreover, as each of the aforementioned artists is a self-identifying homosexual body, their work positions them not just as queer in sexual terms, but combined with their socio-political objectives, queer dissidents. Residing within this dissidence is also their hope to question, unsettle and subvert normalizing narratives of *mexicanidad*. As such, in place of Tito Vasconcelos, Rodríguez, Felipe or Hadad could all be considered within the framework of this dissertation. And yet, they are not. This is because they have been central to the arguments of Diana Taylor, Laura Guiterréz and Gastón Alzate with regards to Mexican *teatro-cabaret*. Not only am I unable to better articulate their importance than these scholars have already done, but my goal has been to include both biologically male and female performers as well as explore cabaret styles over the last century. Hence, as Vasconcelos is one of the artists I examine in this project, I want to offer a brief history of the contributions made by these other noteworthy artists.

Together, Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe are a professional and personal team whose contributions to *teatro-cabaret* have been both outstanding and indispensable. Described by Diana Taylor as “two of Mexico’s most imaginative and radical women directors-actors-performance artists” (“High Aztec” 142), they have created, directed and performed hundreds of pieces over the last several decades while also managing to own and operate the only theatre

space devoted to *teatro-cabaret* in Mexico City. In addition, they have instructed future generations of *cabareter@s*, like Las Reinas Chulas. As Alzate explains, “aunque el trabajo de cabaret de ambas artistas comienza desde 1980, en realidad es a partir de El Hábito cuando su experimentación con este género les brinda la fama y el nombre que hoy en día tienen en la capital mexicana” (*Teatro* 69). Before I explore the importance and ramifications of the space in which the two women perform and offer refuge to other like-minded performers, it is important to explain what is so compelling about the cabaret style of Rodríguez and Felipe. After the ’68 massacre at Tlateloco, the wave of ideological, political and social crises that affected Mexico⁶ prompted Rodríguez to feel unfulfilled by the more traditional and acceptable performance styles of opera and theatre (Taylor 1992). By experimenting and researching, “el cabaret de Jesusa continúa esta línea coyuntural de la carpa y explora el espacio de la diversión para construir una disidencia cultural dentro de los parámetros de este tipo de espectáculos” (Alzate, *Teatro* 70). Informed by her knowledge of German cabaret, Rodríguez sought to create a style in which “la equivocación y la tergiversación se convierten en condiciones esenciales para que se dé el espectáculo,” a spectacle that questioned, defamiliarized and unsettled notions of truth and reality (Alzate, *Teatro* 86).

By unsettling truths and realities, Rodríguez and Felipe question elements of Mexican society ranging from its machista culture to political fraud to erasure of indigenous bodies. For example, in one of their early pieces, *Cielo de abajo*,⁷ the two women explore Nahuatl conceptions of the afterlife, but as female lovers searching to reunite. Their revision, then, breaks down a binary system of male and female hierarchies of love, death and suffering to include non-

⁶ Blanco Cano states, “después de 1968 se estrena el ejercicio de la ciudadanía en México, dinámica que se refleja en las décadas posteriores a través de la crítica a los modelos de género tradicionales, para así proponer familias y narraciones alternativas de la nación” (9). Since Blanco Cano is indebted to Monsiváis’ critical approach to the events leading up to and after Tlateloco, also see Monsiváis 1999.

⁷ See video <http://hidvl.nyu.edu/video/000082234.html>

heterogeneous experiences like that of the two female lovers. Taylor describes how the piece brings indigenous beliefs into the present as a way to challenge myths of a united, homogenized nation, but it also questions ancient beliefs of sexuality and relationships (“High Aztec” 1992). In addition, complimenting the visual and textual elements of Rodríguez’s style, Felipe’s musical dissidence was a perfect fit; Felipe’s sonic contributions are what make the duo a veritable powerhouse of cabaret. As Gutiérrez states, “there is no doubt that Felipe’s songs are some of the most political, feminist, irreverent, and derisive compositions in contemporary Mexico” (11). In *Sor Juana en Amoloya*⁸, the duo resurrects the historical nun, but allows her to acknowledge her openly lesbianic desires. Sonically questioning the almost dogmatic expectations of heterosexual norms within Mexican culture, Felipe sings of various kinds of sexual experiences, “Hay sexos caníbales, hay sexos ditirámicos/Hay sexos que estornudan y nomás siembran la duda.” In the song, “El protoplasma,”⁹ Felipe utilizes the *ranchera* musical genre, one associated with masculine Mexican qualities, to critique gendered violence. With lyrics like “Te voy a arrancar los ojos/como a una vaca /y me voy a hacer un licuado,” the song has become part of cabaret musical history, performed by Felipe, Regina Orozco and Tito Vasconcelos, to name a few.

Motivated by the need not just to create a new kind of subversive theatre, but also the lack of performance space for such efforts, Rodríguez and Felipe opened *teatro-bar El Hábito*. While Taylor’s statement, “that two women artists could own, operate, and even renovate an alternative theatre in a traditional, patriarchal country such as Mexico was exciting” (“High Aztec” 142), is certainly true, they were following a path already paved by the innovative and subversive playwright Salvador Novo. Located on the outskirts of Mexico City, in the artist-

⁸ See video <http://hidv1.nyu.edu/video/001148708.html>

⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KJD1AeaeTr8>

friendly neighborhood of Coyoacán, before the space was *El Hábito*, it was *La Capilla*. As Alzate details, this theatre “fue concebido y abierto por Novo en el año 1964 y allí estrenó gran parte de su última producción teatral...La intención del escritor mexicano era crear un espacio teatral independiente y en este sentido, Felipe y Rodríguez son dignas continuadoras de esa tradición” (*Teatro* 67). In 1990, with their well-established performance record, Felipe and Rodríguez decided to permanently take over part of the space, transforming it into *El Hábito*, which operated until 2005. From 1990 onward, “es posible leer culturalmente la apertura de este bar como una respuesta a la necesidad de la estructura social y cultural mexicana de establecer representaciones plurales de la realidad, representaciones no dogmáticas” (Alzate, *Teatro* 69). Yet, what Alzate fails to mention is the overtly subversive quality of using a former Catholic chapel that Novo, Felipe and Rodríguez, and later Las Reinas Chulas all would capitalize upon. Under Novo, a known homosexual and an artist who used theatre to challenge norms, the satire of using a former church was not lost on his audience (Franco 1992). Rodríguez and Felipe, self-identifying lesbians and feminists, continued Novo’s mission by re-naming the space, *El Hábito*, “a nice pun on the monastic ‘habit’” (Franco 48). When the duo retired in 2005, their former students, Las Reinas Chulas, took over the space, renaming it *El Vicio*, signaling the change in ownership, but not in artistic and satirical mission.

Another essential contributor to the development and evolution of *teatro-cabaret* is Astrid Hadad. Described as “the darling of Mexico City’s cabarets” (Castor 178), this notable performer started her journey towards cabaret after becoming disenchanted with more traditional theatre instruction. Hadad began her theatre career as a student at Mexico’s Centro Universitario de Teatro (CUT), but decided to leave in pursuit of more creative endeavors. One such endeavor was joining the all-female cast of the 1984 production, *Donna Giovanni* alongside fellow

cabaretera Jesusa Rodríguez (Gutiérrez 77; Moncada 364). In this particular piece, Hadad was exposed to Rodríguez's incipient *teatro-cabaret* style, one which "deploy[ed] feminist irony" as means of revising the famous opera, *Don Giovanni* (Gutiérrez 77). In similar ways, Hadad's own style has set out to critique and question "cultural forms that have both included her (as sexual object) and excluded her by historically denying women access to modes of representation" (Gutiérrez 73). Most notably, this *cabaretera*'s style weaves together various styles of Mexican music, cinematic references, dance forms and stunning costume tableaux that all function as "an accomplice in the critical intervention that Hadad seeks in her performance" (Gutiérrez 74). The result is a complex layering of linguistic, visual and sonic commentaries that propose redefining Mexico's established conventions and foundational fictions (Blanco Cano 26). Having been in the audience during her 2013 performance of *Tierra Misteriosa*, these established conventions are often focused on pulling apart the myths that have come to define not just *mexicanidad*, but also the socio-cultural and political place of Mexican women within the nation's past and present.

Hadad's *teatro-cabaret* fuses together various performative traditions that historically have facilitated a space for outspoken and subversive women to flourish. Much like her contemporary *cabareteras*, Rodríguez and Felipe, Hadad too looks to Mexico's *carpa* and *revista* traditions. In addition to the performative structures and techniques, Hadad gravitates towards reviving these traditions because of the way female performers "crearon un espacio social para la mujer, inimaginable en los años anteriores a la revolución mexicana" (Alzate *Teatro* 46). Within this social space, the notable *carperas* and *revista* performers challenged gender binaries by means of cross-dressing, performing masculine behaviors such as drinking and swearing and openly critiqued aspects of Mexican society (Dueñas Herrera 1994; María y

Campos 1956; Merlín 1995). Yet, Hadad's cabaret does not simply revive these forms of the past, but infuses them with elements characteristic of German Cabaret. As Alzate explains, concurrent to Mexico's political turmoil and appearance of *carpa* and *revista* at the turn of century, "se vivió un proceso similar al del Berlín de principios de siglo, salvando las distancias históricas y culturales" (*Teatro* 44). Germany's own socio-cultural and political transformations contributed to the development of a style of cabaret known for its biting wit and harsh critiques (Appignanesi 125-128).¹⁰ Moreover, this style of cabaret placed the performer's body at the center of its subversive expressions. Following this tradition, Hadad combines the aggressiveness of German cabaret and its body-centric practices with her interest in aligning herself within the lineage of female *carpa* and *revista* performers.

The result of Hadad's mixture are productions such as *Amores Pelos*, *Heavy Nopal* and *Tierra Misteriosa* reveal how music has guided Hadad's work. Turning to *carpa*, *revista* and cinematic traditions, Hadad has capitalized upon the possibility of creating entire pieces based on the performance of musical sketches. The *cabaretera* uses musical styles like the *bolero*, *corrido* and *canción ranchera* that have come to be intimately associated with *mexicanidad*. Yet, by means of rewriting lyrics, modifying compositional structures and including more contemporary styles like rock or *cumbia*, Hadad's music is not for passive listening. Rather, music is a mechanism for expressing astute satirical commentaries, and as such, she requires her listeners to engage with the sounds, words and memories being invoked and represented on stage. Alzate eloquently describes, "sobre el cuerpo de Astrid se desarrolla no sólo la actividad de una

¹⁰ Appignasi states, "Berlin's post-war permissiveness did not only produce a frenzied gaiety which hovered over the surface of volcanic social problems. It also gave rise to a group of serious left-wing critics – intellectuals and artists – who chose to use popular forms, newspapers and journals, as well as the small cabaret stage, as the medium for exposing, satirizing, or evaluating the condition of German society" (128). In terms of the socio-political context, she goes on to explain, "Whether the cabaretists' satirical weapons had any impact upon the affairs of the nation is impossible to ascertain statistically. Certain though, satire had some unmeasurable effect upon the consciousness of the people, if only by undermining prejudices and received beliefs – or so Hitler's dictatorship proved by negation" (162).

orquesta de símbolos y voces, sino también un laberinto que exige que el espectador circule a lo largo de él para interpretar los diferentes elementos” (*Teatro* 46). This labyrinth of elements and criticisms is emitted both through and upon Hadad’s body; beyond the sonic cues, her talents as a visual artist come to life by means of costumes that are much more like pieces of art than attire. For example, from *Tierra Misteriosa*, the song, ” Mito como Atzlán” combines the musical qualities of indigenous ceremonial music with the *ranchera* sound to tell a revised story of mythical Atzlán. The story is compounded in complexity by the visual representation of pyramids, literally constructed onto Hadad’s body while on stage. Hadad’s *teatro-cabaret* can be best categorized as a montage of cinematic scripts and satirical musical interventions that have been instrumental in setting the stage for future cabareter@s to unsettle and subvert definitions and stereotypes that have come to define *mexicanidad*.

Film Theory and Queer Gazing

One of the connecting threads amongst the artists in this dissertation is their connection to cinematic mediation. Either appearing on screen or using Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema as inspiration for theatre, film is what allows me to explore the creative processes of Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas’ performances. By examining their on-screen performances or on-stage engagement with the films of the past allows me not only to identify a kind of feedback loop between theatre and film, but also to compare and contrast the distinctive styles of subversive cabaret that characterize each of these artists. Approaching Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas in this way functions to bridge my considerations of performance styles, marginality and queer analysis. At the same time, the act of watching film has prompted scholars from several academic fields to explore how it provokes and creates sensations of identifying or rejecting the screen story and screen characters. Within the specific

context of Mexican cinema, Monsiváis posits the mirror as an apt metaphor for the way in which viewers sought to see themselves reflected on the big screen: how they should speak, act and, very generally, be. In a broad sense, film scholar Laura Mulvey considers the psychological component of identifying with the screen image in a way that echoes Monsiváis; “Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world” (202). However, as Mulvey notes, there exists the possibility of “misrecognition” to occur (202), meaning an inability to connect with the screen image. The importance of misrecognition is such that it can create feelings of alienation, and thus, breaks the contract of recognition and identification between screen image and spectator.

Motivated by this sense of alienation, film scholars interrogate the way misrecognition can become a conscious effort to reject the projection. In her work, Anne Friedberg posits that identification with the screen image rests upon recognition and that “all recognition is itself an implicit confirmation of the ideology of the status quo” (45). Explaining in detail what identification entails she states, “it is a procedure which refuses and recuperates the separation between self and other, and in this way replicates the very structure of patriarchy. Identification demands sameness, necessitates similarity, disallows difference” (36). While Friedberg in many ways reiterates Mulvey’s notion of identifying with the screen image based on sameness, she opens the door towards rejecting the image in order to recognize the Other. This rejection is one that challenges the *status quo* and foundations of patriarchy cemented via cinematic means. Expanding upon the possibilities of rejection, Manthia Diawara focuses on the way black spectators are unable to identify with either the white characters or representations of black bodies on the big screen. Diawara states, “I was interested in the moments of rupture in these two

theories of spectatorship: i.e., the moments when the spectator retrieves his/her identity away from the film. The moments of rupture may be brief, but they enable the spectator to resist complete identification with the film's discourse" ("Black British Cinema" 34). Deeply informed by Diawara's work, hooks suggests not just ruptures, but what she calls oppositional gazing; hooks suggests that black spectators, and more specifically, black female spectators, reject the supposed relationship of identification between the viewer and dominant (white) narratives. In other words, this kind of oppositional gazing affords the non-racially dominant body the ability to reject the purported sameness and similarity required for Mulvey's identification.

That hooks emphasizes the black female spectator as a site of opposition points to a significant element in identificatory practices: gendered gazing. In her seminal article, "Visual Pleasure," Mulvey's wish to look is intimately linked to desire and pleasure rooted in patriarchal traditions in which "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (204). It is from this heterosexual division of erotic gazing and objectification that José Esteban Muñoz's notion of disidentification is useful for proposing alternatives open to non-heteronormative, minority beings. Putting Queer and Film Studies into dialogue, Muñoz's work is particularly adept at exploring the way performers simultaneously engage with and work against mainstream cultural productions in order to break apart hegemonic narratives of being. As such, Muñoz explains the term in the following way: "Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship" (4). The power of disidentifying performances is the

way artists use popular images to re-articulate meaning in a way that includes excluded beings; “the process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification.” (31). At stake in Muñoz’s suggestion are the possibilities of performance to create a place, however marginal, for those bodies “disempowered in such a representational hierarchy” (25) as mainstream cultural productions, like cinema. Hence, I put disidentification in dialogue with the act of oppositional gazing to suggest that Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas, as minority beings, rejected certain screen story images, and through performance, exert their power to create alternative visions.

Queer Theory

The heteronormative and racially exclusive narratives of Mexico’s Golden Age Cinema are of prime importance for exploring how Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas’ performances expose oppositional gazes, embody disidentification and reveal queer acts of subversion. The term queer carries with it a weight and a history, and my intention here is to offer only a brief overview of a single seminal contributor before I delve into how I apply the term and scholarship that has informed my use. To speak of Queer Studies means, almost inherently, to speak of the foundational writings of Judith Butler. While I recognize that there many other contributors to the field, even contemporaries of Butler,¹¹ I want to focus on her particular contributions. This is, in large part, because of the way she has shaped Performance Studies, recent shifts in Queer Studies and the approaches I employ throughout this dissertation.

¹¹ See Sedgwick, 1990. As one of Butler’s contemporaries and foundational contributors to Queer Studies, *The Epistemology of the Closet* is a work that seeks to unsettle the notion of binary sexualities. This work is not included as part of my framework, because though instrumental to developing the field, Sedgwick emphasizes a feminist approach to nineteenth-century literature, which is a direction of thought and a time period outside the scope of this current project.

In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Butler makes several assertions regarding the performativity of gender that have guided thinking about the way performing, and repeating those performances, inform culturally accepted norms, such as gender. As Butler proposes, “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of the body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*Gender* xv). Butler goes further to connect this ritual of performance to her definition of drag, one that includes any kind of gendered construction. What she is getting at by linking drag to gender and performance is that both reveal conscious constructions but also the dangers in equating constructed gender representations to biological sex. Her argument is effectively that when gender and sex are assumed to be one-in-the-same, this assumption is also accompanied by a heteronormative sexual expectation. She explains, “if gender is the cultural meanings that the sexed body assumes, then a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way. Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders” (*Gender* 10). In her follow-up work, Butler expands upon an issue that appears in *Gender Trouble*: the way the normalizing expectations that go along with these cultural constructions become means of exclusion. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler explores the social and legal ramifications for collapsing gender and sex, “if gender consists of the social meanings that sex assumes, then sex does not *accrue* social meanings as additive properties but, rather, *is replaced by* the social meanings it takes on” (5). As Butler proposes, by collapsing sex and gender, non-conformative bodies are at risk for abuse and intolerance as “their humanity is overlooked and replaced by exclusionary measures” (*Bodies* 8). This becomes possible because “the construction of gender operates through *exclusionary* means, such that the human is not only produced over and against the inhuman, but

through a set of foreclosures, radical erasures, that are, strictly speaking, refused the possibility of cultural articulations” (*Bodies* 8).

Indebted to Butler’s groundbreaking work, this dissertation is interested in the way the term queer has, over the last decade, become unhinged from sexual practices and orientation. While still linked to notions of sexuality, queer has become more commonly used in relation to conversations about identity politics and difference, such as Muñoz’s concept of disidentification. Another example is Cecilia Sosa’s work on the act of mourning in post-dictatorship Argentina in which she applies a queer framework. She claims, “in recent years, this field has expanded its boundaries to address concerns that are not exclusively related to sexual and identity politics. Scholars such as Judith Butler, Ann Cvetkovich, David Eng, Lee Edelman, Lisa Blackman, Carolyn Dinshaw, Eve Sedgwick and Sara Ahmed, among others, have crafted theoretical tools to engage with experiences of trauma, loss, and melancholia alongside grief and injury” (2). *After Sex? On Writing Since Queer Theory* is a particularly noteworthy collection of these aforementioned scholars, and many more, as they work through how the term queer has evolved over the last several decades. The contributors examine not just how the term has been applied to discourses ranging from time, race, geographies, memory, performance, trauma and more, but question how queer can mean anything if it means everything.

From this debate, I find the resonating issue of destabilizing heteronormativity and agency particularly useful. As scholar Carla Freccero explains,

Queer, to me, is the name of a certain unsettling in relation to heteronormativity. It can be thought of as, and is akin to, the ‘trace’ in the field of sexuality. Thus *creolité*, *hybridity*, *mestizaje*, *métissage*, *spectrality*, *the trace*, and *the uncanny* all find themselves in certain ways allied with *queer* as terms that do the work of *différance* in relation to the identitarian inflections they carry (17).

Expanding upon this last idea of doing the work of difference, Richard Thompson Ford's assertion is a useful point of departure: "*queer* denotes not an identity but instead a political and existential stance, an ideological commitment, a *decision* to live outside some social norm or the other. At the risk (the certainty) of oversimplification, one could say that even if one is born straight or gay, one must decide to be queer" (123). Applying this idea, I use the term queer to explore the decisions each of these performers make to embody difference, connected to and separate from sex and gender, as central to their acts of subversion.

Drag Forms: Gender, Time and Race

To explore the moments of artistic intersection among Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas, I rely on drag as the primary performative tool through which these performers destabilize norms and perform their queer acts of subversion. Although drag may seem like the most obvious choice given that both Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas are known for using gendered drag practices, my use expands beyond this facet to include temporal and racial drag that become expressed through the sonic and embodied cues. Said in another way, these three forms of drag (gendered, temporal and racial) are ways of queering not just the body's representation, but also the space and time within which the performances occur. Furthermore, the aural and dance components are additional representations of these dragging moments, adding to sensations of being out of place, out of time. For example, Tongolele's danced performances of her mysterious past, set against the backdrop of some kind of primitive African setting, is just one instance of feeling out of step with the world around her. Moreover, Tito Vasconcelos' revision of the queen of *ranchera* music and Las Reinas Chulas' rendition of masculine singing *charros* both question and undermine the musical style that stand in as the sound of *mexicanidad*.

My theoretical and analytical approach is informed both by recent trends in Queer Studies but also by Butler's assertion that "drag is an example that is meant to establish that 'reality' is not as fixed as we generally assume it to be" (*Gender* xxiii). By means of the various forms of drag previously mentioned, these artists unsettle the fixities associated with *mexicanidad* and generally accepted socio-cultural and hetero-normative expectations. Residing within their performances is the agency they exert by performing drag and difference. As Anthony Appiah claims "a self is something that one creates, makes up, so that every life should be an art work whose creator is, in some sense, his or her own greatest creation" (155). By means of creation based in drag efforts, I analyze the importance of how Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas queer and subvert cinema, music and dance. It is within these moments of dragging the body that these artists demonstrate the potential for artistic expressions to create a space, even if it is on the margins, where new ways of being can be imagined.

Gender

Dividing the three forms of drag I propose to use in this dissertation, I will start with gendered drag. As both Gastón Alzate and Laura Guitérrez have previously indicated, drag aesthetics have a prominent place in cabaret performance, especially in the *teatro-cabaret* productions performed by Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas. It is important to note, though perhaps obvious, that the very nature of performance requires that all representations be exaggerated (Schechner 2002; Kirby 1972). However, in these performances, the act of exaggerating gender is a valuable site of inquiry. As such, my foray into gendered drag departs from Judith Butler's own understanding, one based on Ester Newton's anthropological study on female impersonators. According to both Newton and Butler's work, drag "enacts the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed" (Butler, "Imitation" 1519). The

gendered drag practices examined in this dissertation are inclusive of, but not limited to the crossing of genders, such as male-to-female or female-to-male, incomplete transformations, and exaggerations of one's own gender.

My consideration of gendered constructions also enters into dialogue with the idea that certain drag aesthetics lack subversive qualities. With regard to male to female transformations it is worth noting, as Eve Shapiro does, "drag queens can trace their history back to nineteenth-century female impersonators and drag balls in the early twentieth century" (250). In contrast to this, Jack Halberstam asserts that the history of female to male transformation is less clear "because so little has been written about female masculinity that does not reduce it to a stereotype of the lesbian or a pathetic parody of maleness" (241). This reference to stereotyping female masculinity echoes to some extent what Butler refers to the citationality of gendered constructions. According to Butler, "the forming, crafting, bearing, circulation, signification of that sexed body will not be a set of actions performed in compliance with the law; on the contrary, they will be a set of actions mobilized by the law, the citational accumulation and dissimulation of the law that produces material effects" (Butler, *Bodies* 12). What Butler is getting at, and what Halberstam is worried about, is the way bodies, though constructing themselves, do so in a way that only reaffirms heteronormative understandings and stipulations about gendered norms. My dissertation's consideration of gendered constructions is cognizant of these ideas, but does not necessarily agree that citationality lacks subversive qualities. Following Antonio Prieto Stambaugh's assertion about Tito Vasconcelos' re-presentations of female characters, "as Judith Butler would say are not necessarily subversive, since they limit themselves to the reiteration of patriarchally constructed norms" (Prieto 89), I too suggest that

the very act of destabilizing binary codes of representation, or hyper accentuating aspects of gender is an act of resistance that demonstrates that the system can, in fact, be challenged.

Time

In addition to the element of gendered drag, the way each performer either participated in or dialogues with Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema connects them through what Elizabeth Freeman calls "temporal drag." Before entering into a consideration of what exactly this means, it is worth noting the connection between queer acts and time. According to Judith Halberstam, "queer uses of time and space develop, at least in part, in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification" (*In a Queer Time and Place* 1). What Halberstam suggests is that the very act of being "out of sync" with heterosexual expectations of organizing one's time and life plan is the basis for creating alternative chronologies. More specifically, "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* 2). While this alternative space points to the way in which queer acts of subversion can create an alternative mode of being, there is more at stake in exploring how the three artists in this dissertation engage with the notion and performance of time.

Expanding upon the idea of queer time, temporal drag upsets linear chronologies in order to create identities that transition from and in between historical moments. Much like the way gendered drag transforms the body, time too allows the body to move between identity constructions. As Elizabeth Freeman describes, temporal drag carries with it "all the associations that the word 'drag' has with retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present. This

kind of drag, an underdiscussed corollary to the queenier kind celebrated in an early 1990s queer studies” (*Time Binds* 62). According to Freeman, “drag can be seen as the act of plastering the body with outdated rather than just cross-gendered accessories, whose resurrection seems to exceed the axis of gender and begins to talk about, indeed talk back to, history” (*Time Binds* xxi). Central to this concept is also an acceptance of time as a binding force, which as Freeman states, means “that people are bound to one another, engrouped, made to feel coherently collective, through particular orchestrations of time” (*Time Binds* 3). Applying this to Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas, I engroup them by exploring how they and their performances queer the notion of a singular, chronological measurement of time, transforming it into hybrid experience of past and present. For each of the artists considered in this dissertation, this hybrid and binding resurrection of time is intimately linked to Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema. By utilizing time, Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas communicate with, talk back to and re-imagine the notions of *mexicanidad* and gendered expectations associated with and proliferated by this particular historical moment.

Race

The last category of drag that I seek to explore is that of racial drag. Following the Revolution, Mexican politicians and intellectuals put forth an agenda to unite the nation under a new concept of *mexicanidad*. Influenced by contemporary eugenic rhetoric, Joanne Herschfield explains, “the motive of writers such as Justo Sierra in the 19th century and José Vasconcelos in 1920 was to forge an identity that would either incorporate or erase diversity and at the same time construct an “authentic” Mexican culture in opposition to European influences” (“Race” 82). What Herschfield refers to as “mythic Mexico” (“Race” 82) reflects the pervasive reach of Vasconcelos’ concept that influenced artistic, cultural and educational projects throughout much

of the first half of the twentieth century. This mode of creation via erasure, as Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas suggests, was successful and enabled due to the silence of Mexicans themselves; “Mexicans became taciturn and as inconspicuous as possible and in this manner, they cooperated by omission with Vasconcelos’ program for uniting the nation through homogenization” (7). Hence, the work of the three artists considered in this dissertation demonstrates how, through performance, they break with the taciturn acceptance of the official, homogenizing and racist discourses of Mexican identity.

Considering impact of social marginalization and stereotyping, racial theorists have found queer theory useful in conceptualizing how race too can be (re)-presented. As racial theorist Richard Thompson Ford explains, “queer theory offered me an alternative mode – indeed, an antagonistic mode – of engagement with identity politics scholarship and with racial identity itself” (“What’s Queer” 127). Utilizing queer theory, Thompson Ford draws parallels between gendered identity and racial identities; “racial identity, like sexual identity, comes with a set of norms attached; there are (politically) correct ways of exhibiting black, Asian, Latino, and white race – what Anthony Appiah calls racial ‘scripts’ – just as there are established norms for male and female gender” (“What’s Queer” 125). This assertion echoes what many scholars, such as Halberstam, Kathryn Rosenfeld and Sarah Murray have articulated on their work regarding female masculinities. As Rosenfeld claims, “while drag is by definition gender performed, it must also by extension be race performed, *at least* inasmuch as the stylistic and performative characteristics that compose ‘gender’ operate analogously to those which, if they are not one and the same, compose ‘race’” (210). Applying these ideas to the Mexican context, each of the artists in this dissertation construct racial imaginaries that hold potential for envisioning new possibilities of not just racialized bodies, but of subversive racial beings. Hence,

combining their awareness of acceptable racial norms with performances of alternative visions, Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas' engage with pervasive notions of *mexicanidad* and Otherness by means of dragging the body. And, much like their ability to create gendered imaginaries, these artists interrogate and critique the idea of the mythic Mexican.

Chapter Summaries

My approach to each of my three chapters is one that weaves the historical chronology of the particular artist with performative trends from *carpa*, *revista*, and Golden Age Cinema. As a result, this dissertation is a complex narrative not just of each artist, but also the way in which their styles reflect a genealogy of performance in Mexico. I read the work of Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas through a queer lens as they all rupture the master narratives of *mexicanidad* via their engagement with and rejection of norms set by film, dance and music. By turning away, inventing and re-interpreting heteronormative, gendered and racial expectations, these three artists perform their queer acts of subversion.

In Chapter One, I examine the way Tongolele's style of dance and fictionalized persona were captivating constructions. Born in Spokane, Washington, this light-skinned dancer achieved success on Mexico's cabaret stages and cinema screens by performing an identity rooted not in her own foreign status, but in her interpretation of another's foreignness; her categorization as a "mujer exótica" rested upon enacting an imagined understanding of Tahitian and Afro-Cuban identities through dance. Yet, being a light-skinned woman provided Tongolele with opportunities to perform her imagined exotic past in ways that dark-skinned bodies could not. On-stage or on-screen, this dancer used her body as a sexualized tool, but one capable of rejecting male suitors. In this sense, though visually fitting the physical ideals of mestizo *mexicanidad* and acceptable femininity, I read Tongolele's bodily articulations as acts of

resistance towards re-imagining a more inclusive definition. I do this by suggesting moments of fissure and ruptures filtered through her role in the films *El Rey del barrio* (1949) and *Han matado a Tongolele* (1948). In concrete terms, Tongolele's rejection of male advances, unsettling the typical active male/passive female gaze and the importance of dark-skinned musicians are elements of the performance that offer alternatives to cinema's deracination and projections of passive femininity.

Chapter Two focuses on the way Tito Vasconcelos brings to life popular cinematic and political figures while imbuing them with a socio-conscious message and a queer twist. Almost exclusively performing in drag since the 1970s, Vasconcelos' performance style utilizes cross-dressing as a means of unsettling not just gender constructions, but also the representations of the well-known female figures he portrays through performance. Using his *teatro-cabaret* piece, *Martita Primera Dama* (2001) and his short appearance in *Danzón* (1991), I analyze Tito Vasconcelos' use of drag practices and their relationship to music as acts of not just embodied expression, but of embodied resistance that draws upon and modifies historical performance models. For example, employing the sounds of *danzón* and the *ranchera*, audiences not only experience what *mexicanidad* was supposed to look like throughout the years, but also what it was supposed to sound like. And yet, by means of both lip-syncing and live singing, Vasconcelos proposes an equally queer auditory experience for his viewers, destabilizing the sonicscape as much as he destabilizes the visual appearance of gender. Ultimately, with each of the female personas that Vasconcelos drags onto his body, he queers their memory, demonstrating the fictions upon which notions of heteronormative Mexican life are built and the subversive qualities of drag performance.

In Chapter Three, I engage with a single *teatro-cabaret* piece performed, directed and written by Las Reinas Chulas. Intricately weaving together five Golden Age Cinema classics, *Los tres García* (1947), *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), *Ustedes los ricos*, (1948), *Angelitos negros* (1948) and *Tizoc* (1957), the Las Reinas Chulas piece, *Nosotras las proles*, signals the pervasive reach of Golden Age Cinema in determining and directing *mexicanidad* for over half a century. Yet, at the heart of this performance is an effort to dismantle the master narratives that have defined the nation and an intention to queer and subvert the past. To achieve this, the women of Las Reinas Chulas utilize strategies of *carpa* and *revista*, transporting political satire, sketch-based organization, popular songs and gender bending to the contemporary stage. Their revised interpretations of these cinema classics signal the way these women are not disorienting the past, but reorienting it towards a more inclusionary future vision of *mexicanidad*, one that accepts racial and non-heteronormative Others. In order to demonstrate this, I arrange my analysis around the themes of temporal re-orientation, re-envisioning Pedro Infante and the melodramatic family, performing female masculinities and racial tropes.

The artists in this dissertation use cabaret to push against and reject the exclusionary definitions of the past. Operating from inside and outside the margins of popular cultural productions, Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas perform queer acts of subversion that reveal their personal opposition and disidentification with the expectations firmly established by Golden Age Cinema. Through their efforts to drag time, race and gender, they unsettle, destabilize and subvert the heteronormative sexuality, the whitened mestizo and male/female binaries that have defined being Mexican for more than half a century. Through performative means, these artists enact alternative understandings that are more inclusive and

tolerant of the diversity within the nation's borders that continue to inspire contemporary cabaret productions of the 21st century.

Chapter 1:

Tongolele, *mujer exótica*: Embodying and Queering Discourses of Femininity, Race and Exoticism.

I was first introduced to Tongolele during a meeting with Gabriela Pulido Llano in 2012. As we spoke about her research on Golden Age Mexican film, cabaret and Cuban *rumberas*, Pulido Llano showed me photos of another group of dancing women, though lesser-known than their *rumbera* contemporaries. Called “mujeres exóticas” because of their foreignness and provocative dance styles, Tongolele’s photo was among them. Her bare-all costumes and striking white stripe amidst otherwise jet-black hair had intrigued me. When Pulido Llano told me this woman was American, I could not help but wonder how she ended up in Mexico, let alone becoming a semi-famous dancer on-stage and on-screen. After I left that meeting, I set upon watching every YouTube video I could find of Tongolele.

Born Yolanda Ivonne Montes Farrington in 1932 in Spokane, WA,¹² the dancer achieved fame and notoriety by performing Tahitian and Afro-Cuban dance styles under the stage name, Tongolele. What is so compelling about her story is the way Montes created an identity rooted not in her own foreign status, but in her interpretation of another’s foreignness; being defined as an “exótica” rested upon enacting imagined understandings of Tahitian and Afro-Cuban identities through dance. Yet, when she began performing these styles, she had little to no connection with Afro-Cuban or Tahitian life, which begs the question: Why these styles? While I

¹² With the assistance of Professor Marisela Fleites-Lear and Spokane librarians Riva Dean and Becky Menzel, we have discovered that there are some discrepancies between Tongolele’s published biography and census documents. In a phone interview with Tongolele, I asked to confirm some personal information. However, she said that she could not: “Como artista, necesito cuidar algunos detalles” (Interview 2015). Though my argument does not rest upon the veracity of her biographical information, and specifically whether or not she used her Hispanic last name to garner fame, the discrepancies add another layer to the construction of her public persona that is worthy of further study.

cannot answer for Tongolele, I suggest that these styles appealed to her because she could improvise and perform without having years of intensive training like ballet or modern dance. The importance of this is three fold: (1) improvisation allowed each of her performances to be unique; (2) improvisation conjures up images of primitivism associated with Non-Western cultures; and (3) this sense of creation and primitivism function as examples of performing racial drag. As a result, Tongolele's dancing captured audience attention through this freedom of expression and rawness associated with an exotic Other, far removed from more typical and choreographed Mexican dance performances. Furthermore, Tongolele's beauty and exposed dancing body facilitated the appeal of these foreign dance styles and the persona performing them. It is in this sense she also constructed an image of femininity, an exaggerated sensuality to coincide with her exoticism, enacting a kind of gendered drag. At this point the following questions become crucial to exploring Tongolele's success: Who was watching these performances? To what extent is Tongolele conscious of her constructions? How does the cabaret space allow her performances to challenge or reinforce stereotypes? How does she negotiate her performance in the films she participates in?

The primary challenge to exploring reactions to Tongolele's imagined representations of an "Other" and her potential to be transgressive is the ephemerality inherent in performance. As such, I rely on cinematic renderings of her dancing in the films *El Rey del Barrio* and *Han matado a Tongolele*. These two examples serve to highlight Tongolele's dance moves as expressions of multiple experiences: (1) her articulation of dance knowledge; (2) the performatic representation of dance's connection to music and musicians; (3) as an object of desire facilitated by the gaze of audience members and the camera lens. However, using film complicates the importance of the cabaret space as one in which subversive content is possible. Within the

specific context of Mexico's Golden Age of film, Tongolele's transition to the big screen situates her within a broader nationalizing effort to affirm specific behaviors and characters that define *mexicanidad*. One potential consequence of this is that any hope of her performances pushing boundaries is undermined by her participation in this effort to establish acceptable representations of "lo mexicano." Furthermore, the question of who is looking is complicated as the gaze extends outside of the performance space to include film spectators. At the same time, these two works allow me to compare the cabaret setting of *El Rey del barrio* with the proscenium stage of *Han matado a Tongolele*, enriching a discussion about how Tongolele's dancing changed in different settings. In addition, I explore the spatial division of the stage and camera lens as tools for (mis)directing the spectator's gaze towards and away from Tongolele. Ultimately, Tongolele's performances in these films allow me to examine how, despite dragging her body in ways that reinforce stereotypes of femininity, race and exotica, her resistance of male control, the camera's look upon male bodies, and the way sound carries beyond the confines of physical boundaries create fissures in the totalizing project of the Golden Age of Cinema.

Tongolele: From a Lineage of Unsettling Women

While Tongolele's provocative stage presence and dance moves caused a raucous among her audiences, she is far from the first. Rather, she should be considered within a lineage of dancing female bodies that broke down boundaries and commonly accepted female behaviors in Mexico. As such, I position Tongolele as an extension of *teatro de carpa* and *teatro de revista*'s tradition of notable and unsettling¹³ dancing female performers. Moreover, linking the dancing female performers of *carpa* and *revista* during the 1920s and 30s with the generation of "mujeres

¹³ I use the word unsettling much like Susan Foster; a way to shake up perceptions and use dance as a way of approaching the past and present. As Foster suggests, "We met to unseat History, to turn it on its heels and 'have a go' with it. We met to write to life what has been written to death" (*Corporealities* 5).

exóticas,” Tongolele’s presence is key to demonstrating the cultural importance and continuity within the realm of cabaret performance. However, before exploring female dancers, it is important to recognize the significance of strong female performers on the *revista* and *carpa* stages more broadly. Afforded the title of “primera tiple,” leading ladies were often given liberties and gained popularity in ways other actors and supporting tiples did not. As Socorro Merlín describes, “las primeras tiples como María Conesa, Lupe Rivas Cacho o Celia Montalbán se daban el lujo de poner en ridículo a los generales entre cuplé y cuplé” (3). Though only three of many popular actresses of early *revista* and *carpa* productions, Merlín signals their ability to push limits, ridiculing political events and leaders through their performances. Expanding upon this idea, Pablo Dueñas Herrera asserts that these women “dieron motivo a los múltiples censores de aquel tiempo, de fijar un límite de lo decente y lo indecente sin convencer al público cuál era en realidad ese límite” (17).

In part, these women’s ability to provoke their audiences is directly related to their participation in a specific kind of performance environment. Throughout *revista*’s history, the genre adapts to fit its content with the socio-political atmosphere of the time. As a result, *revista* is generally known for its overtly political commentaries during Mexico’s Revolutionary Period. However, shifting from the more political themes of the Revolutionary period of Mexico’s history, *teatro de revista* takes on a new form towards the end of the 1920s. According to both Sonia León and Armando María y Campos, *revista* goes through a “nostalgic” phase, looking back towards the Porfiriato era as an idealized image of the nation. This nostalgic stage is quickly replaced by what León refers to as “revista de variedades,” characterized not by strong political content, but by comedic sketches, musical numbers, dance segments and other performative styles. According to León, by the 1950s this transformation in *revista*’s content

“había tomado el carácter de vodevil y posteriormente se transformaría en lo que hasta nuestros días se identifica como espectáculos de cabaret” (León). This comment is especially useful for demonstrating the connection between *revista*'s transformation in content and my canopy of cabaret; embedded in León's observation is the slippage between what exactly defines cabaret performance and the space where spectacles occur.

Of prime importance for this chapter is the presence of dancing female performers in *revista*'s shift from political to vaudeville and cabaret-like performance styles. As Pablo Dueñas Herrera demonstrates, the groundwork for the popularity of dance numbers had been laid by the success of the Russian ballet dancer, Lydia de Rostow. Dueñas Herrera explains, “ante una sociedad en apariencia gazmoña, en 1908 se presentó otra Diva extranjera que abrió camino a las cultivadoras del baile clásico, arte indispensable de las Revistas Teatrales. Nos referimos a la bailarina rusa Lydia de Rostow” (75). Following de Rostow's dancing footsteps, the dancing trio, Las Hermanas Caro (Eva, Celia and Alicia) captivated audiences throughout the 1920s with their dancing (76). Though just two examples of important female dancers of the *revista* genre, they serve to reveal how dance had become an integral element on the Mexican stage by the 1920s.

The increased popularity of dance in *revista* productions was cemented and greatly shaped by the Parisian revue, Ba-ta-clán. The performance's 1921 debut put the dancing female body on display as never before seen on Mexico's stages, allowing audiences to revel not only in the way these female Parisian bodies moved, but also in the bodies themselves. The female dancers wore little more than skirts and bras, and although these costumes were embellished with feathers or other designs and fabrics, the exposed torsos, arms and legs caused an irreversible transformation in *revista* performances. As María y Campos discusses, the revue name, Ba-ta-clán, even came to stand in as a reference to bare bodies; “el éxito del bataclán, de Paris, acuñó

varios términos que querían significar desnudar a las gentes o las situaciones; bataclán significaba dejar algo en carne viva, en cueros desnudos” (*Género chico* 297). Moreover, Bataclán’s popularity led to increased Mexican *revista* performances centered on the dancing female body, like Mexico’s own version of the Parisian revue, *Mexican Ra-ta-plán*. The 1925 debut of *Mexican Ra-ta-plán* at Mexico’s City’s Teatro Lírico immediately reached “un éxito mayor que el Ba-ta-clán” (Dueñas 25). By replacing Parisian dancers with Mexican women, *Mexican Ra-ta-plán* broke boundaries on the *revista* stage by exposing bodies that no longer belonged to foreigners, but to Mexicans. Erasing the line between what international performers were allowed to exhibit and what Mexican women were allowed to perform irrevocably changed the atmosphere of the era. Ultimately, this fervor associated with these *revista de variedades* focused on the dancing female form created the opening for later female dancers, like the *rumberas* and *exóticas* to take the stage.

My discussion of the Parisian and Mexican dancing revues is meant to illustrate the performative connection between the work of Tongolele and her dancing predecessors. The kind of stages, costumes and dancing associated with Tongolele’s style did not happen in a vacuum, but rather, represent continuity with past *revista* forms. Furthermore, what is important about forging this connection between dance-based *revista* productions and the work of Tongolele is the way it enhances the notion of a canopy under which various performers and performance sites can be explored. In addition, Dueñas Herrera makes a connection that is key to this chapter’s central idea: that the “Divas” of the *revista* (and *carpa*) evolved into a different kind of Diva in the 1940s and 50s. I make mention of the “Divas” of *carpa* because though Dueñas Herrera focuses on the female performers of the *revista* genre, his discussion includes performers that appeared on both the *revista* and *carpa* stages, demonstrative of the fluidity between the two

concurrent styles. As a result of the recognition these *revista* and *carpa* Divas achieved, Dueñas Herrera states, “llegaron entonces las ‘rumberas,’ por medio del cine y luego las ‘exóticas’ con su ropa escasa y sus bailes provocadores, pasando a formar parte de una nueva generación de *Divas* que lograron alcanzar el estrellato más en el cine que en los escenarios revisteriles” (26).

What Dueñas signals is the irreversible popularity of the film industry and its irrefutable contribution to creating a new generation of Divas. It is within this realm of cinematic debuts and exposed female forms that Tongolele, as Mexico’s most well known “exótica,” solidifies her place on Mexican stages and screens.

From the Stage to Big Screen

Exploring Tongolele’s performance style through film appearances simultaneously considers the ways Mexican film proliferated specific conceptions of race and gender and the dancer’s constructed image that queered and subverted those conceptions. As Mexican film scholar Joanne Hershfield explains, much like the pivotal role cinema played in establishing notions of Mexican identity, the industry reinforced categories of women. Pulling from several literary and cultural studies, Hershfield’s work explores how myths such as the suffering but chaste Mexican woman versus the dangerous and destructive sexual women become repeatedly transmitted through cinematic prototypes. Though, as Hershfield notes, “the polarity of bad woman/ good woman is of course not unique to Mexico or Mexican cinema,” (*Mexican Cinema* 13) the industry shaped popular attitudes about the woman as either mother or saint in contrast to the threat of female eroticism embodied in the *cabaretera* or *devoradora*. These two opposing femininities have much to do with the way “women’s conspicuous sexuality threatens traditional concepts of femininity” (*Mexican Cinema* 8). Because of her exposed body, dancing and exotic representation, Tongolele is not exactly a model figure for sainthood or maternity. As such, she

can only belong to the opposite end of the spectrum. Yet, Tongolele does not neatly fit into the *devoradora* category. Referred to as the femme fatale, the Mexican *devoradora* represents threatening women who disrupt male patriarchy via means of flaunting sexual prowess or through a kind of sexual ambiguity that facilitates power and substitution of masculinity (Herschfield, *Mexican Cinema* 107-111). As such, her cabaret performances more closely align her with the category of *cabaretera*. According to Herschfield, the *cabaretera* is a figure associated with “clearly a Mexican genre that incorporated aspects of the earlier ‘seduced and abandoned’ Mexican melodramas, hard-edged elements of *cine de arrabal* (Mexican cinema’s urban melodrama), and popular music from the tropics: the Cuban *danzón*, the rumba and the Brazilian samba” (*Mexican Cinema* 77). Although her appearances in *El Rey del Barrio* and *Han matado a Tongolele* localize her within the urban landscape of Mexico City as well as demonstrate the centrality of tropical sounds to her performances, because Tongolele is not a seduced nor abandoned, this category isn’t exactly a perfect fit either.

Hence, I suggest that Tongolele fashions a particular representation of femininity pulling from the aforementioned possibilities. Employing Butler’s consideration of drag as an enactment of “the very structure of impersonation by which *any gender* is assumed” (“Imitation” 1519), I examine Tongolele’s performances as acts of drag by and which she constructs a specific kind of femininity that flaunts her sexuality via daring costumes and dancing, but is still considered “safe” because it does not challenge the *status quo* of male domination. As a result, this kind of conspicuously sexual, and yet benign, femininity positions Tongolele on the fringes of Mexico’s female stereotypes. Contributing to her place on the margins is the fact that she herself is not Mexican, but rather an outsider who strategized her image by means of embodied exoticism. Hence, by participating in Mexican cultural productions from this location of marginality, this

place of belonging to and outside of traditional definitions of femininity captures what Halberstam refers to as a “queer place.” Defined as a being out of alignment with mainstream popular culture, it is from this queer place that Tongolele is afforded the opportunity to challenge expectations and boundaries of what *mexicanidad* means.

In addition to cinematic female prototypes, acknowledging the cinematic gaze is crucial for analyzing Tongolele’s performances as vehicles for manipulating or queering Mexico’s acceptable gendered relations. As a way of defining qualities of the gaze, I quote E. Ann Kaplan at length:

“there is the look of the camera in the situation where events are being filmed (called the profilmic event) – while technically neutral, this look, as we have seen, is inherently voyeuristic and usually ‘male’ in the sense of a man doing the filming; there is the look of the men within the narrative, which is structured so as to make women objects of their gaze; and finally there is the look of the male spectator that imitates (or is necessarily in the same position as) the first two looks” (210).

In the case *El Rey del Barrio* and *Han Matado a Tongolele*, both films have male directors who position Tongolele at the center of their gaze, the male characters’ gaze, and the non-screen story male spectators’ gaze. Expanding upon the idea of spectatorship in these two examples, it is important to note that the spectator gaze was double: it belonged to the “live audiences” in performance space and to the non-screen story spectators of the films. Yet, as Kaplan goes on to describe in her work, the cinematic gaze is not always and only male: there is a female gaze. Kaplan asserts, in some cases, men are “rendered the object of woman’s gaze” or even “placed explicitly as a sexual object to a woman who controlled the film’s action” (215). Though she is analyzing U.S. based films in the context of the 1980s onward, these observations are useful in considering Tongolele’s performances as women were both part of the “live audience” and watched the films. As I will discuss in my analyses of *El Rey del Barrio* and *Han*

matado a Tongolele, these female gazes form part of the sexualization of the male bodies on stage. However, what Kaplan does not address is the way women gaze upon the bodies of other women. In the case of *Tongolele*, it is important to consider moments when these films reveal how women looked upon and reacted to her.

At the center of these observations of the gaze, and its gendered quality, is desire. As Laura Mulvey explores in her seminal work on the cinematic gaze, this desire is rooted in wanting to forge a connection with the on-screen image. Mulvey explains, “here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world” (201). This idea can be directly connected to Mexican cinema’s efforts to, as Carlos Monsiváis claims, (re) create an ideal image of *mexicanidad* reflected back to audiences “a través del espejo” that was the big screen. Beyond this desire and possibility to see themselves, as Carlos Bonfil explains, Mexico’s film industry assumed the responsibility to project model citizens of life; “lo que importa es contener los posibles desbordamientos, el relajamiento de las costumbres, la corrupción moral que acecha en el corazón de la gran urbe” (*Espejo* 18). As a result, what is valuable in *El Rey del barrio* and *Han matado a Tongolele* are the ways in which the camera reveals both the recognition of self as Mexican, but also the misrecognition through representations of “Otherness.” By misrecognition, I pull from Mulvey’s statement that what appears on-screen is “an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, of recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity” (201). Embedded within this comment is the binary between recognizing, and thus, identifying with the screen image as a reflection of subjectivity versus the possibility of misrecognizing the image, and hence, seeing it as an image of the Other. With a particular focus

on my two film examples, these spaces of misrecognition are made possible through the visual and spatial divisions that segregate gendered and racial bodies.

Yet, in my subsequent analyses, I propose that this process of identification and misrecognition is made more complex due to the way racial representations of “lo mexicano” and “el Otro” are as consciously constructed as gender. As Anthony Appiah claims in his writing on a society’s notion of identity formation, “the large collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person of that kind behaves: it is not that there is *one* way that gays or blacks should behave, but there are gay and black modes of behavior” (159). In what he calls “scripts,” Appiah suggests more broadly that bodies perform according to the role society assigns them, and as such, that they act out acceptable modes of behavior. At stake in this idea is that racial bodies are expected to perform a kind of identity that coincides and reinforces social expectations.

Connecting Appiah’s notion of scripts to the films *El Rey del barrio* and *Han matado a Tongolele*, expectations are embodied in the construction of difference. As Tongolele performs a racialized identity rooted in abstract notions of Afro-Cuban and Tahitian exoticism, she most certainly constructs an image of Otherness in contrast to *mexicanidad*. Much like her performance of femininity, Tongolele also drags an exotic imaginary onto her body, queering her own racial representation. Furthermore, the musicians that accompany Tongolele on stage are visibly dark-skinned, alluding to not only their Cubanness, but also to their “Other” status within the skin-lightening efforts of Mexico’s intellectual and cultural institutions. To emphasize their difference, these dark musicians are confined to areas of the stage either far in the back or off to the side, spatially conveying a social script of limited visibility and marginality. While it was a convention of *rumbera* films to separate the musicians from the dancer in order to highlight her

performance, there is something distinct happening in these two films: the presence of primarily dark-skinned musical bodies goes against the norm of almost entirely light-skinned mestizo orchestras. Not only are the black bodies contained physically but also visually, as the camera rarely focuses on them like it does in films with light-skinned musicians.¹⁴ *El Rey del barrio* and *Han matado a Tongolele*, then, can be examined in dialogue with a kind of drag practice that extends beyond the realm of gender to encompass constructions such as race.

Contributing to my consideration of gender and racial drag practices in Tongolele's dancing, her participation in cinema suggests moments of rupturing the monolithic and exclusionary concept of *mexicanidad* filtered through acts of oppositional gazing and disidentification. Although film theorist Manthia Diawara is speaking about racial depictions in the U.S. film industry, his comment can equally be applied to Mexican cinematic efforts of the 1940s and 50s to create an idealized image of being Mexican. He states, "Hollywood films are made less threatening to whites either by white domestication of black customs and culture - a process of deracination and isolation - or by stories in which blacks are depicted playing by the rules of white society and losing" (Diawara, "Black Spectatorship" 71). In both of the films, *El Rey del barrio* and *Han matado a Tongolele*, the image of the "Other" is made safe for the Mexican spectators in and out of the screen story by the physical segregation on the space of the stage as well as the fact that the central object, Tongolele, is a white, almost mestiza-looking figure. In this sense, audiences are able to set aside any anxieties about racial mixing. However, expanding Diawara's ideas, bell hooks suggests the act of oppositional gazing; the spectator resists identification with the dominant narrative embodied in the on-screen image ("Oppositional gaze" 230). As a way of exploring this act of resistance, I suggest that different

¹⁴ For a comparison see *rumbera* classics: *Aventurera* (1950); *Konga Roja* (1943); *La reina del trópico* (1946); *Amor de la calle* (1950), to list a few.

kinds of gazes, like that upon the male body or the female gaze towards Tongolele, are crucial elements in chipping away at the male-driven desire to look. Furthermore, from within the screen story, whether conscious actions or not, there are moments in both films when the performers' actions create fissures in the totalizing narrative of the passive/sexualized woman and safely contained "Other."

These moments are what I want to situate as acts of disidentifications as proposed by José Esteban Muñoz. As Muñoz states, disidentification is "about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component" (29). Moreover, for Muñoz, the potential of disidentification to challenge popular conceptions of identity is by working in *and* against the system creating the narratives. In this sense, by participating in Mexican cinema, Tongolele, her musicians, and the other figures around the stage are perfectly placed to challenge norms from within. Furthermore, beyond being representations of idealized images of race and gender, the on-screen characters hold the potential to transgress the cinematic narrative of how Mexicans should act or look.

***Las rumberas*: Constructing Sexualized Female "Others"**

Unlike her dancing *rumbera* contemporaries, Tongolele's exposed skin and fast-shaking hips firmly situated her within the category of "mujeres exóticas." To better explore what exactly it meant to be considered one of these "mujeres exóticas," I need to first define the characteristics of the "rumbera." It is important to make this distinction because Tongolele is often categorized among her *rumbera* contemporaries. For example, the 1992 article, "Rumberas de ayer" states, "Rosa Carmina, María Antonieta Pons, Ninón Sevilla, Tongolele y otras fueron las grandes rumberas del cine mexicano, muchas de ellas cubanas que triunfaron en México e

hicieron de ese país su segunda patria” (Valdes 32).¹⁵ Not only was Tongolele not Cuban, she was also not a rumba dancer. Contributing to this mis-categorization is the fact that Tongolele did incorporate Afro-Cuban rhythms and live musical accompaniment, facilitating a kind of overlap between the *rumbera* and *éxotica* categories. Yet, by establishing the cultural context, musical connection and dance style of the *rumbera*, I am able to examine the ways in which Tongolele both overlaps and diverges from this model as an *éxotica*.

At the heart of what defined a *rumbera* was, as Julio Chávez states, that they danced rumba (95). Chávez goes on to indicate that these women may also incorporate dance routines to “música antillana o tropical” (95) more broadly. Beyond the dancing, what this comment illustrates is the more fundamental connection between the dancing body and musical forms. Acknowledging the Cuban roots of rumba, the blanket “música antillana o tropical” functions as a way of also alluding to Cuban music without actually specifying the genre or site of origin. Additionally, this notion of “música antillana o tropical” is a reference to the integration of Cuban musical styles, such as the son, danzón, bolero, mambo and rumba, into Mexico’s vibrant sonicscape.¹⁶ As scholar Rafael Figueroa-Hernández explains, Mexico’s geographical proximity to Cuba has facilitated the exchange of people, goods, and cultural practices “primero a través de las regiones geográficamente más cercanas como Yucatán y Veracruz,” and later throughout the rest of the republic (35). Of specific interest is the arrival of musicians, instruments and musical styles, the integration of which began in the late 19th century with the arrival of son and danzón, followed by the aforementioned popular music genres. With the exception of the bolero, which as Alejandro Madrid explains, maintained its name in Mexico but “underwent stylistic

¹⁵ As Alicia Arrizón erroneously claims in her article about the de-racination of the Cuban mulata body, “the *rumbera-cabaretera* also became the subject of exotic narratives in Mexican cinema during that country’s golden period. One star, Tongolele (Yolanda Montes), soon drew international acclaim” (147).

¹⁶ See Madrid and Moore 2013.

transformations as it was adapted to Mexican tastes in different places and at different moments” (*Music in Mexico* 42), the son, danzón, mambo and rumba were overwhelmingly left unchanged by their arrival in Mexico.

As these Cuban musical forms made their way through the Republic, settling in Mexico City, they became irrefutably popular and instrumental in shaping the way bodies and social bonds were conceived. As dance anthropologist Amparo Sevilla explores, these tropical musics were accompanied by dance forms that also made their way into dancehalls. As a result, Sevilla explains, these dance halls came to represent the “pocos espacios públicos que posibiliten el encuentro y la comunicación colectiva para la recreación” (34). Hence, these Cuban rhythms brought Mexican bodies into contact within a space that allowed them to focus on enjoying the sounds and movements rather than the outside world. The importance of this, as Sevilla notes, is that the dancehalls represented a semi-public atmosphere within which the dancing bodies were able to express and enjoy themselves without fear of religious restraint or punishment (34).

Beyond the ability to express oneself through dance, these spaces represented a temporary opportunity for patrons to suspend socio-economic and geographical divisions, allowing bodies to coalesce in ways otherwise unlikely, if not impossible. This separation from external life was undoubtedly important for constructing an idealized image of these Cuban dance and musical forms. As Gabriel Pullido Llano signals the famed dance hall, Salón México, is an example of just how important these Cuban representations were: “El Salón México fue un escenario de inserción de ‘lo cubano’ en la ciudad de México – ya fuera una moda mediatizada, el antecedente de un gusto público manipulado o el resultado de un medio con condiciones para su aceptación -. Además de que representó la estrecha relación entre la novedad de los espectáculos tropicales y la vida popular capitalina” (90). Perhaps the most well known and long

lasting dance hall in the capital city, Salón México is just one of many spaces where Mexico City inhabitants could go and enjoy the sights and sounds of these “tropicalized” spectacles of Cubanness. As a result, the proliferation of these places and their popularity irreversibly imbued Mexico City and the nation with a specific idea of Cuban cultural forms.

An important aspect of this cultural insertion and presentation of “lo cubano” into Mexico City was the way it created a script for acceptable spaces to perform Cubanness. More specifically, Cuban bodies were accepted within Mexico City, but only insofar as they were musicians; the son, danzón and rumba were commonly “interpretados por orquestas cubanas o por grupos mexicanos que contaban con varios cubanos entre sus integrantes” (Pullido Llano 85). As a result, these primarily Cuban ensembles both contributed to the popularity of Cuban rhythms in Mexico as well as assisted in creating an imagined and sexualized “tropical” stereotype. In front of Mexican audiences, the sound of Cuban musical styles paired with their ‘Othered’ bodies conjured up “La Habana idílica, territorio intermedio, una vez más, de paso entre el trópico ‘real’ y sus provocaciones eróticas, trópico ‘importado’ a la vida nocturna capitalina, sitio donde realidad y ficción se confunden. De día y de noche, La Habana ‘de fuego’ es también un discurso repleto de significados” (Pulido Llano 104). At stake in this observation is the way it points to how this sexual imaginary was not only constructed by non-Cuban bodies but also how it socially and culturally segregated these “Others” from what it meant to be considered Mexican.

Perhaps even more important than the Cuban musicians to this imported image of idyllic, erotic and fiery Habana was the *rumbera*, simultaneously an expression and a means of constructing exotica. Though it may seem obvious to point out, but much like the fact that Cuban musicians performed Cuban musical styles, these *rumberas* were also Cuban. Though Meche

Barba proves an exception to the rule, as the only Mexican *rumbera*, the other famed dancers, María Antioneta Pons, Ninón Sevilla, Amalia Aguilar and Rosa Carmina, were all Cuban. Synchronous with the timing of the music, the *rumbera* body transmitted an interpretation of rumba compositions through movements of sensual femininity. By this I mean that while the *rumbera* used her feet, arms, hips and gaze to connect her body with the timing of the music, her movements were coquettish and pushed, but never broke, boundaries of what was considered acceptable dancing for women. Part of what maintained the *rumbera* within these boundaries of acceptability and situated the *exótica* outside of them was her appearance. The *rumbera* costume generally kept much of the female form covered; even if the fabric was translucent over the torso or legs, she did not expose much of her bare skin. Additionally, the *rumbera* costume was often adorned with ruffled fabric or feathers, adding to the intricacy of the attire as well as highlighting movements around her hips and torso. This is to say, as the *rumbera* body danced, this extra fabric and adornments emphasized both the part(s) of the body that moved and created the sensation that her movements were larger or more exaggerated than they were. The description Pulido Llano makes of the rumba and its *rumbera* eloquently captures their appeal to Mexican audiences; “rumba que es mujer, rito sexual; rumba que es música brillante, complemento de la imagen que remueve con sus movimientos el sueño que mantiene inmóvil al erotismo; rumba que es *sex symbol* de la posguerra, sueño de ‘lo latino’, irradiación de ‘lo cubano’” (104). This image of the *rumbera* was not solely a result of her presence on stages like that of Salón México, but rather, her appearances on-screen.

The impact of Mexican cinema was indispensable for the creation of an idealized imaginary of Cuban sexual exoticism filtered through the *rumbera* body. As *rumba* scholar Yvonne Daniel suggests, the dance captures “the important elements of life: movement,

spontaneity, sensuality, sexuality, love, tension, opposition, and both freedom and restraint” (1). While it is outside the scope of this work to explore in detail precisely how film settled on the provocative female dancing body, Mexican cinema seems to have honed in on the sexy and sensual elements described above. At stake in film’s decontextualization of the *rumba* and its *rumberas* is the way it obscures traditional secular rumba dancing, which is quite different from my above descriptions. As Daniel describes, rooted in the words *rumba* and *rumbón*, the dance and music are intimately linked to notions of “a collective festive event, a gala meal, a carousal, or a high time (17). This element of unity is a reflection of rumba as “an Afro-Cuban performance culture and social event where drum base music, dance, and singing function together as the organizing principle” (Jottar 3). Though common for the rumba performance space to be “a closed, usually semicircular area with the parameters marked off by onlookers” (Daniel 75), something re-created in cinematic stagings, couples are generally at the center of this arrangement, not the idealized mulata body. In her work, Berta Jottar details the differences between the three main traditional forms *yambú*, *guaguancó* and *vacunao*,¹⁷ all couples dancing, while Daniel adds the *columbia*, a less common male solo form. Yet, whether couples or soloists, “rumba as a dance/music complex involves specific drumming patterns and instrumentation, special songs, a particular song form, three basic types of dance, and, above all, elaborate improvisation” (Daniel 63). Most importantly, this description reveals the bond between the musicians and dancers within this segregated space, which is an element of cinematic representations, but re-presented as several musicians and a singular dancer.

¹⁷ Jottar describes: “the *yambú* (a couples dance no longer practiced popularly, but done within show contexts); the *guaguancó*, an urban phenomenon characterized by its cadence for dancing couples; and the *vacunao*, a gesture symbolic of sexual possession performed by the male dancer towards the female while dancing” (3). Daniel describes in the male solo style, the *columbia*, “the aim is perfection of form and style, interchange, bravado, and competition” (69).

This fantasy of the female Other was also dependent upon cinema's manipulation of Cuban racial imaginaries. Echoing Dueñas Herrera's comment about the arrival of the *rumbera* via Mexican cinema productions, Pulido Llano adds "en la temática de las imágenes de 'lo cubano' en México, la rumba se asoció a la imagen del negrito bembón y la mulata que es su adorno" (104). On one hand, this description emphasizes my earlier discussion of the fundamental connection between the dancing body and musical composition. It is important to note how this comment also reflects the inherent connection between the dancer and musician, existing within the segregated space, as described above. On the other hand, Pulido Llano's description highlights the way in which the tropical Cuban spectacle was simultaneously comprised of and divided between "el negrito bembón" and his dancing "mulata." The separation between these two roles was consistently (re)produced and (re)inforced spatially in stage and on-screen production as each assumed their assigned place. Although the above description suggests that the dancing mulata adorned the musicians, she took center stage; her moving body, as a sexualized body, was the focal point of *rumbera* performances. In contrast, the musical bodies moved less as they played their instruments and were also situated on the sides or behind the stage. While I will further distill this visual separation through my analysis of Tongolele's performances, it is worth noting how this division associates mobility with the desirability of the female form. Specifically, this dancing female body captured the attention of audience members and cinema audiences. As a result, her form becomes an object of male viewing pleasure, an embodiment of Laura Mulvey's assertion that "in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (203). Though the female *rumbera* body possessed a "looked-at-ness" quality, Mexican cinema's incorporation of her

dancing in conjunction with sounds produced by the “negrito bembón” musicians contributed to the creation of a new filmic genre based in projecting typified tropical imaginaries. As Pulido Llano explains, “el cine mexicano de los treinta a los cincuenta acogió a las mulatas y a los negros como personajes que adquirieron una considerable popularidad. Se aprecia su tránsito por los escenarios cinematográficos en argumentos, canciones y ritmos, y culmina en la creación del conocido cine de las rumberas, que dio cabida a ambos tipos populares” (121).

In addition to the spatial separation between dancer and musician, their division was also easily discerned based on the performers’ skin tone. By using the term “negrito,”¹⁸ it is immediately clear that these musicians bodies were dark, and although Pulido Llano uses the term mulata to describe the *rumberas*, most were light-skinned. While the contrast between the dark musician and white female body is a theme I will develop in my analysis of Tongolele’s performances, it is a theme that should be situated within the context of race in post-revolutionary Mexico. Specifically, this division speaks to the way in which race was both crucial construction for defining *mexicanidad* and access to social recognition. For example, from José Vasconcelos’ seminal work, *La raza cósmica*, racial discourses sought to blend Mexico’s ethnic variability into an almost mythical Mexican mestizo, a body that venerated its indigenous past but silenced a promotion of Mexico’s dark(er) skinned ancestors. As Anita González states, “for almost a century, Mexico has promoted an ideal of its citizens as a combination of indigenous and European ancestry. This construct obscures the presence of African, Asian, and other populations that have contributed to the growth of the nation” (1). Of primary interest for this work is the way in which this intellectual and political “lightening” of the Mexican race sought to erase the presence of African slaves from Mexico’s history and racial

¹⁸ “Negrito” is also the diminutive form of “negro,” which in this context, is also meant to be demeaning, as if to treat the person as a child.

composition. By not including these dark-skinned bodies in the conceptualization of the new mestizo, the nation distanced itself racially from nations with larger African populations, such as Cuba. Hence, the dark musician bodies and mulata dancers (however light-skinned) embodied an Africanized lineage conceptualized as both foreign and “tropical” by Mexicans because any such bodies had been all but erased from official discourses and historical events. Furthermore, this racialized image was cemented into socio-cultural memory by means of the Mexican cinema: “la asimilación de los estereotipos del negro y la mulata cubanos como recursos escénicos en el cine mexicano de los años cuarenta y cincuenta permitió el desarrollo de la temática de ‘lo tropical’ y ‘lo exótico’, manteniendo el sentido de extranjería de estos personajes” (Pulido Llano 120). These racial images cement scripts of white female privilege to be seen and mobile juxtaposed by the black male musicians forced into static and marginalized positions.

Las mujeres exóticas: Constructing “Otherness”

In addition to *rumberas* and negro bembón musicians, the “mujeres exóticas” are another example of how Mexico’s cinematic and stage productions reveal the falsity of gender and racial constructions. As Tongolele recounts in a 1966 interview, “a mí me llamaron exótica por el color de mis ojos, por mi nacionalidad, porque interpretaba bailes tahitianos que entonces aquí casi no se conocían” (García Hernández 123). Taking advantage of her audience’s fascination with her quick moving hips, exposed body, trademark mechón blanco set against jet-black hair and “enigmática mirada,”¹⁹ Tongolele fashioned an image rooted in her sensual “Other” femininity to maintain audience support and intrigue. Not alone in seeing the potential for success, Tongolele’s most well known contemporaries, Su Muy Key and Kalantán, were also recognized for their performances of non-Mexican dance forms and physical exoticism. Similar

¹⁹ According to García Hernández, this enigmatic look was so captivating precisely because it was unrevealing of emotion or insight into her personality. See pg. 94.

to Tongolele, Kalantán²⁰ was an American-born dancer whose light skin, scant clothing and belly dance inspired moves gained notice. However, differing from Tongolele, her performances were reminiscent of burlesque or striptease dances, as she slowly removed clothing to reveal little more than a bikini. This emphasis on revealing and displaying the female form was also an essential part of Su Muy Key's performance style. Of Chinese descent, Su Muy Key²¹ used and transformed her body into the idealized image of the "Orient" as a way of establishing her stage persona. More specifically, her performances ranged from painting her stark white body and remaining motionless, like a doll, to style of dance described as "la danza mística, elegante, misteriosa y profunda" (Muñoz Castillo). Though the dance forms and strategies for presenting the female body differed between these three figures, the way in which they embodied notions of an "Other" solidified their popularity with Mexican audiences on and off stage.

Although there were many other *éxoticas* of the 1940s and 1950s, their reign and fame was relatively short lived. Unlike the *rumberas*, who not only successfully transitioned to the big-screen, but also solidified their performance style through cinema, the "mujeres éxoticas" were not as lucky. Beyond the three major figures, Kalantán, Tongolele and Su Muy Key, there is very little information or recorded material available regarding the "mujeres éxoticas." Part of this can be attributed to a phenomenon that Tongolele speaks of in a 1966 interview, during which she signals an emphasis on the sexualized body over respect for the dance form. As the first woman to be considered an "éxotica," Tongolele speaks from a perspective of having experienced the development of the category and its changing expectations. Though she does not specifically name Kalantán, Su Muy Key, or any other *éxotica*, Tongolele states, "pero luego

²⁰ It is worth noting that Kelantán is a Malaysian state, suggesting that Kalantán's name was not merely an invention, but likely a conscious effort to connect her middle-Eastern influenced dance style to an Eastern region of the world.

²¹ Her name means Rose in Chinese. See

http://www.poresto.net/ver_nota.php?zona=yucatan&idSeccion=33&idTitulo=94881

vinieron artistas...que hacían algo distinto a lo mío y también fueron llamadas exóticas... Ya después han venido muchas imitadoras que se mueven y adoptan posturas morbosas” (García Hernández 123).²² As Garcia Hernández further explores, the owner of the Tívoli, Américo Mancini, believed Tongolele’s success was easily recreated with almost any dancing female; “el cree tener descifrada la clave del éxito de Tongolele. Su lógica es simple: un nombre extraño, más una cara hermosa, más un cuerpo inquietante, más una danza diferente, igual a é-x-i-t-o” (100). Furthermore, Mancini believed that the *éxotica*’s success had little to do with the dancing: “el ‘secreto’ no es bailar sino enseñar más, provocar más, sangolotear más, no importa que el movimiento pierda ritmo” (102). This comment reinforces Tongolele’s observation about the creation of a category of women for whom dancing was not the central component of the performance, but rather the exhibition of their exotic bodies. As a result, this formula of a sexualized female “Other” did not find itself reproduced on the big-screen, like the more contained image and dancing talent associated with the *rumberas*.

While Kalantán, Su Muy Key and Tongolele were able to make the transition from the stage to the big-screen, only Tongolele seems to have achieved a level of success that outlasted even Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema. Beginning with her first cinematic appearance in *Nocturno de amor* (1947), the dancer went on appear in several films during the Golden Age of Cinema: *La mujer del otro* (1948), *Han matado a Tongolele* (1948), *El Rey del barrio* (1949), *El amor no es ciego* (1950), *Chucho el remendado* (1951) and *Mátenme porque me muero* (1951), *Había una vez un marido* (1952) and *Música de siempre* (1956), just to list a few (García Hernández 147).²³ In many of these early on-screen appearances, Tongolele appears as herself for a brief cinematic rendering of her cabaret act, though, as her film career progressed, she did

²² For more on the way Tongolele’s contemporaries viewed her, see Chávez 1992; Su 1989.

²³ For a full filmography, see IMDB <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0599600/>

take roles that allowed her to develop as more than just a dancer. For example, in *Mátenme porque me muero*, “una parodia del filme policiaco,” Tongolele has a lead role as Tin Tán’s love interest, the calculating (dancing) seductress Satanela (García Hernández 147). Continuing her career beyond Mexico’s Golden Age years, she appeared in several cult-classic favorites such as *Las mujeres panteras* (1966) and *The snake people* (1968). Though outside the scope of this chapter to explore these films, it is worth noting that even as an actress, Tongolele’s personified female figures that enchanted, cheated and seduced; rather than develop a breadth of acting abilities, her roles often showcased her body, emphasizing the trope of object of desire. Dancing and performing throughout the second half of the century, Tongolele’s name still makes headlines. For example, in his 1989 article called “Teoría de Tongolele,” playwright Salvador Novo negated the formula of the “exótica” as central to what set Tongolele apart from her contemporaries. Novo claimed:

“ni la señorita Su Muy Key, ni la señorita Kalantán, ni otras surtidas réplicas para cuya prosperidad y crédito sus descubridores buscan nombres extraños y orígenes asiáticos, le han servido a la señorita Tongolele ni para el comienzo. No parece, pues, consistir la fórmula en que se tenga un nombre raro y se enarezca, sobre el nombre, el vestuario. Algo tendrá por encima de sus competidoras la señorita Tongolele, algo que merezca la explicación, el análisis, la exégesis, que yo (que no la he visto nunca) acudí a mi sabio amigo el fabricante de teorías para que me la diera” (García Hernández 112).

Getting closer to a tangible definition of Tongolele’s appeal, her costume designer, Julio Chávez claims a kind of humbleness about her rise to fame; “nunca se ha considerado exótica, simplemente bailarina de ritmos afrocubanos” (108). Yet, even without an explicit recognition of creating an image of exoticism, the dancer was fully cognizant that she was creating some kind of identity. As an example of this, her costumes exposed her body in order to highlight the dance moves but also the way her dancer’s body moved. Moreover, Tongolele was aware that to be

famous, her abilities needed to extend beyond simply being beautiful: “para mantener al público tienes que hacer en el escenario algo más que exhibirte. La persona que crea que sólo por su belleza va a seguir en esto del espectáculo está equivocada. La belleza tiene que ir con un talento específico” (Manzanos 66). For Tongolele, this talent included convincing her audience through dance that she was the essence of Tahiti and Afro-Cuban exoticism.

Tongolele’s Performances of “Otherness”

Born in Spokane, Washington, Yolanda Ivonne Montes Farrington was the daughter of a multicultural union: her father was of Spanish and Swedish descent, her mother of French and English descent, and her grandmother of Tahitian descent.²⁴ From the early age of three, Yolanda proclaimed her desire to become a dancer and after her parent’s divorce, Montes focused more intensely on dance. So enraptured by the idea of being a professional dancer, at the age of 15, she left home in pursuit of a job with the International Ballet of San Francisco (García Hernández 35-38). As García Hernández explains, the company performed its choreographies in local cabarets and “tras un periodo de intesos ensayos, con ejercicios de barra y montajes coreograficos, Yolanda es enrolada en uno de los grupos que están preparándose” for a performance in the Joe Di Maggio Club in San Francisco (48). This experience proved to be fortuitous, leading Montes both into the world of cabaret and Tahitian dance. After the Joe Di Maggio Club, Montes was invited to perform at the most famous Tahitian cabaret in San

²⁴ In working with Professor Marisela Fleites-Lear, Northwest Librarian, Riva Dean and Genealogy Librarian, Becky Menzel, much of the biographical information García Hernández (and many other sources) has published does not match with U.S. census information. The first errors are the names and professions of her parents. Listed in a 1931 Spokane census, her parents are Edna P. and Elmer Erickson, a crane operator for the Great River Northern Railway. While Erickson’s family was listed as Swedish, there seems to be no connection to the Hispanic last name, Montez/Montes on either her maternal or paternal side. Additionally, a 1930 Spokane census raises questions about Yolanda’s own name and birth date, listing her as Patricia Y, born in 1930. In a 1940 Alameda, California census, Edna P. is listed as living with her second husband, Alexander Edwards and her three children from her marriage to Erickson. Edna’s mother, Della Dickey is also listed as living with the family. There is no biographical information available to suggest she is of Tahitian descent.

Francisco, El Huracán where she learned Tahitian choreography and rose through the ranks from a chorus performer to soloist. Montes's experience at El Huracán provided her with the dance vocabulary that shaped her future success as well as contract offers to perform in Los Angeles, and later, Tijuana, Merida and Mexico City (García Hernández 47-50).

After her improvised performance at El Huracán, Montes was offered a contract for “una revista cubana en Los Ángeles” (Pagés 19), where she was exposed to Afro-Cuban rhythms, musicians and dance styles. Integrating these Cuban influences into her dance repertoire, she quickly gained recognition in Southern California and beyond; she was offered contracts in Tijuana, Merida and Mexico City. However, it wasn't until her arrival in Mexico City in 1947 that the figure known as Tongolele was born. As the burgeoning star gained recognition on the cabaret stages through Mexico, the owners of Teatro Iris offered Montes a contract as a soloist “en una revista cubana” (Pagés 19). However, as Montes recounts, before her debut, “la esposa de uno de los empresarios me dijo que por qué no cambiaba mi nombre por uno más adecuado a las formas de mi estilo de baile” (Pagés 19).²⁵ More specifically, she suggested Montes take on a name that combined “un sonido fuerte que le parece africano, ‘Tongo’, con otro que tiene un aire tahitiano, ‘Lele’: Tongolele” and from that moment, “así nace la misteriosa palabra que dará lugar a tantas y muchas veces absurdas conjeturas” (García Hernández 68). As if shrouded in myth and mystery, Tongolele's origins, personal life and dance background would be the topics of scrutiny and exaggeration, contributing to her rise to stardom on stage and on screen.

While the mysterious word, Tongolele, was an important element of the dancer's success, her improvised embodied expressions functioned to create an imaginary of who she wanted to

²⁵ According to costume designer, Julio Chávez, “el empresario del teatro Tívoli (demolido al abrirse la continuación del Paseo de la Reforma), señor Mancini, la contrató bautizándola con el nombre de “Tongolele”, idea que surgió de una cinta americana “Flor del Trópico,” cuyos protagonistas eran Robert Taylor y Hedy Lamar, que hacía de una hermosa nativa de las tierras calientes de Africa llamada Tondelallo que bailaba en la selva al ritmo de tambores africanos” (107).

be. As part of this imaginary, Montes' skilled improvisational performances capture the body's articulations of what Bertha Jottar calls "performatic memory." Though Jottar's work focuses on rumba dancing in New York City, she suggests that identities and histories become expressed through improvisational movement as "the present of the past enters the circle through the participants' diverse articulations of embodied memory or 'performatic' memory" (9). More specifically, Jottar situates improvisation as the mechanism through which communal and individual socio-cultural experiences collide within and project outward through bodily movement. Additionally, that Montes relies on improvisation allows her a kind of freedom of movement and creativity that is generally inhibited through strict choreography, which as Montes states, "siempre ha sido nefasta para mí" (Manzanos 66). For Montes, her preference for improvisation reveals her embodied memories guided by years of autodidactic study trying to emulate other dancers. The importance of her learning process is the way in which it challenges notions of the need for formal training to be a successful dancer. As dance scholar Jane C. Desmond asserts, the idea of dance should be open to interpretation, and as a result, creates a vast realm of possibilities for learning: "when movement is codified as 'dance,' it may be learned informally in the home or community, like everyday codes of movement, or studied in special schools for social dance forms" (Desmond 31). Additionally, Montes's ability to see dance movements and re-create them through her own body is demonstrative of her ability to construct an identity through dance. By means of what Susan Leigh Foster calls dance "literacy," (Foster *Reading Dance* 58), Montes watches how the bodies of other move so that she can re-create those motions with her own body and to fit her own performance motivations. As such, for Montes, improvisation allows her to recontextualize movements in such a way that they are unique expressions of her conscious construction of a dance persona.

For Montes, this collision of experiences, though, reveal a performance of embodied memories pertaining to cultures outside her lived experiences. Through dance, Montes transmits a racial identity that she has dragged onto herself, as if an outfit, in such a way that her performances do not reveal past and present experiences within Tahitian and Afro-Cuban cultures, but rather, her creativity in imagining what these collisions would look like. Moreover, her improvisations of “Otherness” are also predicated on a sexualized notion of these Tahitian and Afro-Cuban cultures. Not only did Montes consistently perform in costumes that exposed much of her body, she utilized animal prints and floral designs, as if to visually allude to animalistic or topical stereotypes of these two regions. Effectively, linking these visual images with the foreign sound of her name and non-Mexican movements, Tongolele created a persona based on performing the stereotype of “Other” cultures as primitive.

Despite what would seem like a calculated approach to fashioning her public persona, Tongolele’s seemingly lack of critical thought behind her work is striking. In a 1998 interview, Montes emphasizes that she never sought to invent her own dance form, but rather, wanted to synthesize the styles she enjoyed learning. As she explains:

“siempre he trabajado y nunca he dejado de hacerlo. Esa es la razón. Ahora, en realidad yo no estaba inventando nada. Lo que yo quería era bailar. Siempre me han gustado los bailes, con mucho ritmo. Me encanta la variación del ritmo. De un disco africano, tahitiano o cubano, o de cualquier cosa, saco ese ritmo y lo incorporo al baile” (Pagés 19).

In part, Montes is responding to and negating the idea that she invented the category of the “exótica” and its dance form. Yet, at the crux of improvisation is the act of invention and it is strange that Montes does not consider her own preference for and reliance on improvisation as an opportunity to create. Furthermore, the dancer seems uncritical about what she does with dance: finding inspiration and taking rhythms from other cultures. Embedded within Montes’ statement

is the danger of not just taking from these other cultures, but performing African, Tahitian or Cuban styles in such a way that they become entirely disengaged from their original contexts. I suggest danger because audiences exposed to Montes' renditions risk understanding her performance as some kind of truthful expression of these "Others." Additionally, her preference for improvisation reinforces, even if it were not Montes' intention, an implicit notion that Tahitian and Afro-Cuban dances lack choreographic structures; that they exist in a realm of more "primitive" cultural expressions.²⁶ This can be further distilled through her decision to dance barefoot and again connected to her costuming, which reinforces primitive imageries. At stake in her performances is that critical or not of her actions, it is through Tongolele's refashioning²⁷ of dance forms that we can appreciate "in codified fashion, socially constituted and historically specific attitudes toward the body in general, toward specific social groups' usage of the body in particular, and about the relationships among variously marked bodies"(Desmond 32).

Transitioning from the stage to the big screen challenged the way in which Tongolele preferred to dance. Specifically, the scripted quality of filming and the need to be able to repeat scenes inhibited the improvisational style the performer was known for. As Tongolele explains, "yo trataba de explicar a los directores que no puedo, no soy capaz de hacer exactamente lo mismo cada vez. Por eso siempre me aburrí bailando para el cine" (Manzanos 66). At stake in these scripted articulations, however, are the ways that they continued to express notions of exotica and "Otherness." Unlike her live performances, these scripted articulations of Tahitian and Afro-Cuban imaginaries were recorded and archived, making their proliferation and

²⁶ In her work on ritual and dance, Maya J. Berry suggests that "Ritual dances are opportunities for worshippers to pay homage to the Orishas, but also establish alignment with the forces of nature" which, in their improvisational nature, are also more "primitive alliances" with the world.

²⁷ I use re-fashioned as per Jane C. Desmond's assertion that "the dance retains traces of that origin, now refashioned both through changes in movement style and through its performance by different dancers in different contexts" (37).

permanence possible. Susan Foster explores the relationship between choreography and corporealities, stating that writing about dance examines “the body’s role in the production of narrative, in the construction of collectivity, in the articulation of the unconscious, in the generation of postcoloniality, and in the economies of gender and expression, they contour relations between history and memory” (Foster, *Corporealities*, xv). In this sense, by exploring Tongolele’s cinematic productions, I hope to signal how these filmed performances are more dangerous than her improvised dances. I make this assertion because they form part of Mexico’s state-supported cinema industry, one whose intent was to cement images of the “Other” into popular memory. As a result, Tongolele was no longer performing the embodied memories of a foreign culture for a small cabaret audience, who would quickly forget, but rather, choreographing her articulations of Otherness to be used for the specific project of imagining the boundaries of Mexicanness.

Though both films required Tongolele to choreograph her movements and consistently repeat them during the filming process, her performance style in *El Rey del barrio* differs greatly from her pieces in *Han matado a Tongolele*. To begin, the performance stages are distinct, with a cabaret environment in one film and a proscenium stage in another. As a result, Tongolele’s dancing is shaped by the (in)formality of space; the cabaret facilitates improvisational-like qualities to the dance while the proscenium stage offers much more formal dance choreographies. As a way of analyzing the differences, I rely on Susan Foster’s notion of “reading” from my perspective as a viewer “who retains visual, aural, and kinesthetic impressions of the dance as it unfolds in time” allowing me to “compare succeeding moments of the dance, noticing similarities, variations, and contrasts and comprehending larger patterns – phrases of movement and sections of the dance – and finally the dance as a whole” (*Reading*

Dance 58). In order to distill the differences, in *El Rey del barrio* I focus on the following “choreographic conventions” that Foster proposes: “the style – the way the dance achieves an individual identity in the world and in its genre; the vocabulary – the basic units or ‘moves’ from which the dance is made; and the syntax – the rules governing the selection and combination of moves.” In *Han matado a Tongolele*, I also rely on these conventions as well as include another that Foster calls “the frame – the way the dance sets itself apart as a unique event” (59). “Reading” these elements in both films functions as a point of departure for considering how cinematic scripting both inhibits and exposes Tongolele’s ability to use her body as the expressive subject. As a way applying these ideas, my subsequent analyses explore how Tongolele’s dancing and connection to the audience and musicians enact and pick apart popular attitudes about femininity, race and *exotica* 1940s and 1950s Mexico.

***El Rey del barrio* (1949)**

The film *El Rey del Barrio* is an adaptation of the Robin Hood story in which Tin Tán and his friends dress up as if they were part of Mexico’s wealthy in order to steal from them and give back to their poor, working class neighborhoods. As such, Tongolele does not have a major role; she appears briefly as a dancer at a local cabaret that Tin Tán and his friends visit. Because of the brevity of her appearance, my analysis of her performative repertoire is limited. Yet, her short dance performance allows me to begin an exploration of her style and relationships to the people and space that surround her. Part of what is valuable about her performance is that the film connects Tongolele to renowned *carpa* actor, Germán Valdés (Tin Tán), highlighting the way Tongolele overlapped with her *carpa* and *revista* contemporaries. In addition, this merger of cabaret performance setting and cinematic plot lines reveals the way early Mexican Golden Age

films were informed by styles such as *carpa* and *revista*, an observation that will be discussed in my consideration of *Han matado a Tongolele*.

Performing and Possessing Memory

Appearing as herself, Tongolele's screen-time is limited to a 3-minute solo routine. Though short, this solo can be divided in two movement styles: the first seemingly more acrobatic and uninhibited and the second as percussive and more reflective of Afro-Cuban influences. During the first half of the performance, Tongolele's movements do not fit nicely into her Tahitian or Afro-Cuban style. Rather, her vocabulary combines acrobatic high kicks, wide and flowing arms, running around in a circular motion, long jumps spanning the performance area, and thrusting and circular hip motions. Tongolele begins the routine on the cabaret floor; she moves her arms in a graceful and circular motion around her, extends her leg up towards the ceiling, and then rises to her feet. Once standing, her knees are soft and bent, a posture that allows Tongolele to freely move her hips forward and back or in circles as she walks as well as facilitates her quick transitions from move to move. Ending this section with clear pose, bowing down to the musicians, Tongolele begins the second half with strong and vigorous Afro-Cuban inspired movements. Informed by the polyrhythmic quality of Afro-Cuban dance, Tongolele's body parts move both independently and in sync with one another. Simultaneously extending both arms up towards the ceiling, she takes a step to the side (known as the *guaguancó*), repeating these motions several times as she makes her way across the floor. Upon reaching the front of the stage, Tongolele shifts the emphasis onto her hips and arms. Propelling her hips back and forth as she walks around the perimeter of the floor, every few steps she quickly extends an arm up into the air, throws back her head, and then pulls her arm back in towards her waist. After completing a circle around the floor, she begins her last movement series: a possessed-like

rolling on the floor. In a seizing-like motion, Tongolele falls to the floor, flailing her arms and legs. After rolling to the back and front, Tongolele makes her way back her feet, spinning in a circle until bringing the routine to a close, lightly bowing to her audience and musicians.

Despite the cinematic need for choreography, the dance has an improvisational quality. Exploring what Foster calls syntax, Tongolele's choreography has an overall cohesiveness, but at times lacks transitions between one series of movements to the next. What I mean by transitions are the steps, directional changes, spins or some other kind of bodily shift that creates continuity between one move or series to the next. Without these transitional movements, Tongolele's syntax sometimes seems forced or without much forethought, as characterized by improvisational technique. This aspect of her performance is most noticeable at the end of the first and second part of the dance, as it seems that Tongolele pieces together moves waiting to reach the end of the song. For example, in the first section, Tongolele performs a kick that matches with a strong musical moment, which would have been an appropriate moment to end. However, as the song continues, Tongolele combines jumps, running around the perimeter of the stage and a drop to the floor, all as if waiting to hear the song come to an end. Similarly, after her possessed-like floor rolls, which also seem like a climactic moment to end the dance, the music continues to play. As a result, Tongolele rises to her feet, spins several times, falls to the floor and, as if instructing the band to stop playing, comes to the back of the stage and stops moving. While the lack of transitions in each of these examples does not necessarily indicate that Tongolele was improvising her dance, it is revelatory of how fundamental improvisation is to her style. More specifically, the sometimes-forced combination of movement vocabularies is perhaps a reflection of the fact that she doesn't generally plan the order of her movements.

In addition to Tongolele's preference for improvisation, her interest in Afro-Cuban dance styles and their connection to music is fundamental to shaping this performance. Embedded within Tongolele's comment, as earlier quoted, "siempre me han gustado los bailes, con mucho ritmo. Me encanta la variación del ritmo" (Pagés 19) is the way in which her movements are influenced by the sound of the music. As a result, not only does her body express her dance history, but it also functions as a medium for interpreting musical compositions. The use of her body to connect with and to musical beats reflects how she both hears and internalizes rhythm, which she then transmits outward through dance. Additionally, her expression of musical sounds functions similarly to a costume, used and modified in order to emphasize a certain look or interpretation of character. This is best perceived by means of the two rhythmical segments for this performance: the first part of the piece is cha-cha-chá compositional structure played by an orchestra comprised of bongoceros, trumpet players and a piano, while the second is heavily percussive in sound and instrumentation. Though Tongolele does not dance the steps of the cha-cha-chá, the composition is a slower and more musically complex sound, allowing her to emphasize large movements and incorporate extensions, jumps and kicks. However, the percussion-driven beat of the second part is much faster, informing her quick thrusts, spins and steps derived from Afro-Cuban dances.²⁸

Though sonically, quite distinct, the theme that connects the two parts is Shango. Sung in a language other than Spanish (most likely Yoruba), the two parts of the song repeat the name of the Orisha, linking the performance to both Cuba and Africa. As the center of the Lukumí religion and god of thunder, fire and lightening, the musical mentioning of Shango situates the performance as a call to Cuba's cultural and religious elements. Additionally, this reference to a

²⁸ Though not a rumba performance, per se, this change in tempo echoes Daniel's observation that quite often rumba pieces "starte relatively slowly, with the tempo increasing greatly by the end" (10).

well-known aspect of Cuban religious culture, Santería, indicates the extent to which these dark-skinned musicians are “playing their part,” following the exoticized script they are expected to abide by: stereotypical black, musical Cuban “Others” who worship and become possessed by non-Catholic gods. This role, made sonically explicit, only becomes more pronounced in relation to Tongolele’s subsequent dance moves. Though speaking broadly of sacred dance forms in Cuba, Daniel’s observation that “dance is instrumental in communication between the human and spirit worlds in the beliefs of many religious groups” (21) could be easily understood as a description of Tongolele’s next series of movements. Cognizant that cultures have “baile para santos, para el matrimonio, para el amor, para esto y para lo otro,” Tongolele claims, “yo solamente bailo con la alegría tic bailar. No estoy tratando de bailar rituales especiales. Sólo bailo por el placer de bailar y hacer un baile bonito” (Pagés 19). And yet, as she rolls around on the floor, violently flailing her limbs as if unable to control her own body, evokes images of ritualistic possession. These possessed-like motions echo Daniel’s description of the way rumba and Santería intersect, “symbolic religious movements can occur in rumba also. In columbia (a rumba style), floor (ground) work is rare, so it is curious and noticeable when rumba dancers fall to the floor in a ritual salutation for the deities of Yoruba descent” (78). Again, though not a rumba, Tongolele’s falls to the floor not only conjure up images of the sacred ritual of possession, but channel these sacred origins. More so than her other Afro-Cuban inspired steps, by including these moves in her choreography, Tongolele seems to be doing more than simply paying homage to Lukumí. Rather, she transforms her body into an imagined articulation of Cubanness intimately related to an African past. In this sense, her body’s movements do more than de- and re- contextualize ritualistic movements; they queer them, making them different and palatable as part of a spectacle for her cabaret audience. By interpreting a scene of religious

possession, which in its original setting (read Cuban Santeria worship house) would more than likely have included dark-skinned bodies, Tongolele transforms this image from a sacred Santeria practice into a de-racialized and domesticated fantasy for Mexican audiences.

As previously discussed in the context of *rumberas*, this short segment reinforces a specific cinematic image of the light-skinned dancing female body and the “negrito bembón” Cuban musician. Through Tongolele, the white female, and her dark-skinned male orchestra, I suggest that the musicians are Cuban in part because of the musical arrangements they play: cha-cha-chá, a form derived from the Cuban danzón, and the percussive call to Shango. Furthermore, as Anita González claims in her work on Afro-Mexican presence and cultural productions in Mexico, “for many Mexicans, blacks *are* Cubans, eternally a part of Mexican culture but never quite Mexican” (34). This quality of “never quite Mexican” is emphasized visually and spatially as the musicians are separated from the cabaret patrons and dance floor. Though she is not Mexican, commanding center stage and the audience applause in response posits Tongolele as an accepted outsider while the musicians are not afforded the same treatment.

Segregating Musical and Racial Scripts

The musicians’ estrangement is emphasized through their physical distance from the stage and limited mobility. In contrast to Tongolele’s central presence on the dance floor, the musicians are behind her, off stage and static. Moreover, with the exception of the piano player and a single drummer, who flank the side of the stage, the musicians are separated from the stage, the dancer and the crowd by a banister. This spatial division differs from many contemporary *rumbera* films and Tongolele’s appearances in other works.²⁹ For example,

²⁹ See *rumbera* classics for a comparison: *Aventurera* (1950); *Konga Roja* (1943); *La reina del trópico* (1946); *Amor de la calle* (1950). To compare to contemporary Tongolele appearances, see: *Mátenme porque me muero* (1951); *Chucho el remendado* (1952); *El amor no es ciego* (1950).

although orchestras were occasionally off to the side of the stage, it was more common for musicians to be center stage behind the dancer. Moreover, these musicians move; many orchestra members sway from side to side or even have their own choreography they perform. In *El rey del barrio*, however, these bodies are fixed, portrayed more like sound-producing décor than active participants in the performance. I do not mean to say they do not move at all, as they do play their instruments, but the majority of the musicians are relatively motionless as they perform. That these bodies do not move and are physically restricted from even coming close to the dancer and crowd creates a visual message of not just containment, but of a conscious mission to keep the dark-skinned bodies away from the general population.

In addition, the camera's limited gaze upon these dark bodies further establishes their liminality. Unlike several *rumbera* classics where dark and light-skinned musicians are often the subject of close-ups, these musicians are part of the camera's frame only when Tongolele approaches the back part of the stage. When they do appear on-screen, though, this gaze exposes the filmic audience's pleasure in seeing them. At the same time, this looking firmly establishes the limits of this pleasure; the tropical imaginary is intriguing, but must be contained. All of these segregated, dark-skinned bodies being male also reflects a broader anxiety about their Otherness and acceptable masculinity within Mexico. However, their sonic production transcends their spatial containment, reaching not just the performance area, but also the crowd. In this sense, their aural contact with the bodies in the cabaret space demonstrates their potential for breaking down the visual and physical barriers. The way in which the sonic sphere creates an opportunity for these "Othered" bodies to challenge the desire to exoticize and contain them, gives them a sense of power and agency. As Muñoz discusses in his work on disidentification, this sonic production can be explored in terms of how "a representational contract is broken; the

queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable ways” (Muñoz 6). Relegated to the back area of the cabaret, that these dark bodies are able to motivate Tongolele’s movements and reach the ears of the audience becomes a sound-based act of “jolting” the social order of difference and separation. As such, even as without intentionality, their sonic reach undermines the film’s visually constructed discourse of segregating dark-skinned Others.

Rupturing and Subverting Heteronormative Gazes

Returning to the wish to see oneself reflected “a través del espejo,” the camera also mirrors the gendered gaze of the male director, cameramen, character and spectator, transforming Tongolele into an object of male desire. More specifically, the dancer’s exposed body moving around the dance floor becomes the focal point of pleasurable looking for both the cabaret patrons and film viewers. As Mulvey suggests, the woman generally functioned in the following ways: “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (204). Within the screen-story, Tongolele’s bikini-clad body and dance moves quickly garner the attention of the film’s male protagonist, Tin Tân, and other male patrons. Yet, her movements are contained within the limited space of the stage, which unlike the musicians, though, is not meant to reinforce her outsider status. Rather, Tongolele’s containment emphasizes her positioning as an object of desire and assuages any threat of her being able to physically penetrate the audience’s space. Exemplifying Mulvey’s assertion that “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (203), this containment would seem to position Tongolele as passive female performer and Tin Tân as the active male viewer. However, Tin Tân’s actions go beyond looking

as he permeates the space of the dance floor trying to touch the erotic (exotic) object. And yet, the male protagonist finds himself pursuing a not-so passive female; every time Tin Tán attempts to get close to Tongolele, she extends her leg in a high kick, forcing him to move. This pattern is repeated several times until Tin Tán gives up, kisses her cheek and leaves the dance floor area. Though seemingly playful kicks, as Tongolele doesn't actually touch or harm Tin Tán, her movements can be read as an attempt to protect herself from her male pursuant. The concluding kiss while reinforcing Tin Tán's desire to possess the erotic (exotic) Tongolele, leaves her once again in control of her space and over the spectator's gaze.

Though brief, Tongolele's moments of resistance and regaining control reveal what I referred to as potential fissures in the totalizing project of Mexican films; the female object of desire expresses her desire to be left alone. Whether or not she intended for her actions to be oppositional to the general model of the eroticized and passive female body, they are. Not only that, but this opposition is also an act of disidentifying with the pervasive cinematic renderings of female archetypes. As such, her bodily expressions of resistance work both within and against the film industry to suggest the possibility that a woman can create and control her eroticized image without being based in the male gaze.

As further support for distancing Tongolele's actions from the heterosexual male gaze, it is important to consider the female spectator both in the film and outside of the screen story. I suggest the female spectators within the cabaret space in *El Rey del barrio* can serve as alternative readings of the non-screen story discourses about Tongolele and her performances as immoral. As her biographer explains, the rhetoric her performances provoked often took on a religious tone, one that accused her of being a threat to morality, impious and as risking her own soul and those of her male spectators (García Hernández 105-106). In a 1997 interview,

Tongolele stated, “no me importaba si los periódicos escribían que yo ni cantaba, ni bailaba, o que era una desnudista vulgar; no me importaba nada de lo que se escribía sobre mí” (Manzanos 66). While both male and female voices scolded Tongolele for her dancing, typifying the consecrated binary of the woman as saint/mother or whore, they are not the only response to Tongolele’s work. Rather, in contrast to the female voices writing and speaking out against her, as demonstrated in *El Rey del barrio*, women did enjoy her performances. For example, the camera’s reveal of several female spectators looking upon Tongolele’s dancing body does not suggest disgust or outrage, but rather, an appreciation for her work. In the same way that Tongolele continued performing, unaffected by the negative reviews of her work, these female gazes suggest the possibility for resisting the narrative of acceptable female actions. These women enact an opposition gaze, finding inspiration in the dancing figure as a woman who possesses an ability to express her sexuality without always falling prey to male control. At stake in these on-screen figures is the way they can be understood as stand-ins for women outside of the screen story, women who came to watch Tongolele and found a way to circumvent the binary of female roles in Mexican society.

Despite the potential for reading the on-screen female gaze as opposing the traditional narrative, it is also important to consider that these female onlookers are part of a consciously choreographed scene. It is not by chance these women are at this cabaret, but rather, they are part of the filmmaker and his crew’s constructed simulacrum of lived off-screen cabaret experiences. Yet, embedded within my above analysis is a reading of these female on-screen gazes as rupturing and creating fissures within the planned execution of the scene. This is to say, in spite of being given specific directions about where to stand and where to look, these women’s faces hold the potential to express a non-heteronormative gaze of desire. This possibility highlights the

artificiality of appearances projected a través del espejo that is Mexican cinema versus the reality of homosexual desire in on-screen characters.

Han Matado a Tongolele (1948)

In order to more fully develop an analysis of how Tongolele's dance style can be read as a queer interpretation of Mexico's gender and racial expectations, *Han matado a Tongolele* is especially valuable. As a murder mystery with a thin plot line, the film's central focus is on Tongolele's last dance performance. Described as a banal and inconsequential for Mexico's cinematic history (Castro 157), it is precisely the film's marginality that makes it compelling for my analysis. The basic premise of the work is that one of Tongolele's male admirers tries to kill her rather than let her retire and marry someone else. Though this murder plot drives part of the film's progression, the action also occurs in relation to Tongolele's dance numbers. With three choreographies, Tongolele's dancing is the major attraction, supplemented by other acts; between her appearances the audience is entertained by an Asian magician and his assistant, live flamenco dancers and musicians, Mexican male trio that performs classic songs such as "La bamba," and a folkloric dancing troupe. Although this film lacks the comedians characteristic of *revista* and *carpa*, like the ever-popular Tin Tán or Cantinflas, the film reveals a sketch-like quality similar to the organization of *carpa* and *revista* productions, rather than a performance united by a central plot or theme. This element reflects the way in which audiences did not only want to see their favorite *carpa* and *revista* artists on-screen³⁰, but also wanted to see a format they were familiar with and enjoyed. Additionally, the content of these sketches serves to present conceptions of gender roles, *mexicanidad* and 'Otherness' as produced on the theatre stages and their subsequent cinematic re-presentations.

³⁰ As Carlos Bonfil states, during the early years of cinema's growing popularity, "surge la opción de un star system nacional que favorece la familiaridad del público con sus estrellas" (22).

As the focal point of the film, Tongolele's screen time is significantly longer than her short appearance in *El Rey del barrio*. Additionally, emphasizing her fame and popularity, Tongolele performs on a proscenium stage in front of a large audience at Mexico City's famed *Teatro Follies*. The importance of this stage is precisely the way it maintains a clear division between the famed *éxotica*, the beautiful Other, and the audience whom she entertains with her choreographies. Unlike the intimate environment of the cabaret, "the typical proscenium stage creates a theatre of illusion, whereas smaller, more informal spaces lend themselves to performance in which events are to be seen as happening in a quotidian time and place" (Foster, *Reading Dance* 60). What Foster signals is the way in which the proscenium stage not only sets the artist apart from his or her audience, but also elevates them to a status of existing outside of reality. More importantly, this sensation of being out of real time and space allows me to analyze Tongolele's dancing as a performance of a "queer time and place." This idea is explained by Halberstam as the way "queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death" (2). In this sense, the proscenium stage facilitates a kind of queer rendition not of Tongolele's future, but of her invented past that exists outside of locatable geographies and regulated, chronological time. As an example of this, the dancer's presence on stage seems to last the entire night, without any sense of the passing minutes or hours, unlike her finite performance on the small cabaret stage. In addition, this space's separation from real time helps to facilitate Tongolele's almost mythical reputation; commanding the entire theatre, production and audience with her dancing. Furthermore, performing within this queer time, the stage becomes

transformed into a vehicle not only for commanding her audience's attention, but also for queering expressions of exoticism and femininity.

This proscenium stage, however, is only part of what makes her performance in the film different from other examples of her dancing. According to Foster, this kind of stage is part of a process which she calls "framing," defined as "the way the dance sets itself apart as a unique event" (*Reading Dance* 59). Within the category of framing, other efforts are used to reinforce the uniqueness of the dance performance. For example, the way an event is publicized functions to create intrigue and interest; "descriptions of the event in these announcements help establish its distinctiveness through reference to generic types – ballet, modern, or contemporary – as well as through adjectives ranging from 'brilliant' and 'breathtaking' to 'deeply moving,' 'compelling,' 'fascinating,' 'provocative,' and so on" (Foster, *Reading Dance* 60). Advertising images are also important as they "evoke a particular image of the event. Photographs may depict dancers seeming to leap off the paper with picture-perfect daring" (Foster, *Reading Dance* 60). Though *Han matado a Tongolele* relates little information about the way the event was advertised, what adjectives were used, or how Tongolele's figure was rendered in photographs, performing at one of Mexico City's most well known theatres is indicative of her notoriety in the capital city. Additionally, the camera's view of the crowd of people outside Teatro Follies trying to get tickets and the panning shot of the auditorium filled with spectators reveal both the event's popularity and that the attendees had some level of previous awareness about the event. Perhaps suggestive of other advertising efforts, the event's name, "Hoy Despedida de Tongolele," displayed in the big lights outside the theatre, signals the importance of this particular performance. While it is unclear how long the event's name was displayed, the words,

“Despedida de Tongolele,” frame the performance as the last time Mexico City patrons will be able to watch the renowned dancer.

With the knowledge that this evening of performances is to be Tongolele’s last, the audience eagerly awaited her characteristic hip movements and revealing costumes. Throughout the duration of the event, Tongolele performs three numbers that seem to tell the story of her mythical origin. As such, this series of dance sketches allows her to drag up the past, performing what Elizabeth Freeman calls temporal drag. In her work, Freeman asserts that “it may be crucial to complicate the idea of horizontal political generations succeeding one another, with a notion of ‘temporal drag’” meaning that rather than showcasing the generational progression of time, a chronological linearity, disruptions are rich sites of inquiry (“Packing History” 729). Using this idea, what Tongolele does is not only drag her past into the present, but also the supposed pasts of African and Tahitian tribes from where her lineage emerged. At stake in this queering of chronologies is also the way it exposes the way she constructed her exotic racialized image.

Tongolele’s Mysterious Origins in Three Parts

During her first piece, Tongolele’s movements and interactions with the other bodies depicts the interactions between an outsider and what seem to be her captives. Emerging from a tiger cage, barefoot and dressed in a cheetah print bikini, Tongolele catches the attention of what are presumably “natives.” Immediately surrounded by dark-skinned male drummers and men wielding spears, the strong percussive sounds and imminent threat of harm guide her movements; Tongolele slowly moves within a contained circle space, combining high kicks and isolated hip circles before falling to the floor. As the bodies move in around her, removing any chance of escape, the music and attitude of the spear-holding bodies changes. The music changes into sounds reminiscent of Afro-Cuban compositions with faster, up-beat percussion that inform

Tongolele's execution of movements. To this new beat, Tongolele performs rapid isolations of her shoulders, hips and pelvis. After she completes this series, she spins in a circle while the bodies around her thrust their spears inward, as if to threaten her safety. Yet, after Tongolele completes her spin and begins her movement sequence again, the bodies bring their weapons back to a neutral pose and watch her dance. This pattern continues until, perhaps reaching exhaustion, Tongolele falls to the floor and the curtain is drawn. When the curtain re-opens, Tongolele and her circle of "captors" repeat the dance sequence once more until Tongolele falls for the last time, ending the piece.

Embodying the Lele part of her stage name, Tongolele's second appearance is a reference to her Tahitian heritage. Wearing a bikini top decorated with flowers and grass skirt bottom, Tongolele makes her way through trees and netting to reach center stage. The combination of the costume and the set design are immediate visual cues that she is about to perform a Tahitian-inspired piece. Reaching center stage, Tongolele is greeted by a group of female and male dancers. Following the speed of the music, Tongolele and the dancers' movements are slow and concentrated in the upper body. Though Tongolele steps from side to side, slightly swaying her hips as she does so, her arms are extended and flowing, as if replicating the motions of a wave. The dancers around her mimic these movements, drawing attention to the steady fluidity of their arms and upper body. Much like her previous dance number, this first song draws to a close and is followed by a faster, more percussion-driven sound. It is during this second part that Tongolele performs a solo on the podium located in the center of the stage. While Tongolele dances, the male dancers remain standing, lining the edge of the stage and the female dancers sit arranged in a half circle around Tongolele. During her solo, Tongolele's hips primarily drive her movements; she performs a vocabulary of isolated hip thrusts, vertical hip circles and horizontal figure eights.

To maintain focus on her lower body, Tongolele contains her movements within a limited space, either directly behind or directly on top of the podium while also limiting her arm movements. Once on the platform, Tongolele uses level changes, shifting from standing to kneeling positions to highlight her hips' continual movement and range of motion. Furthermore, as she raises and lowers her body, Tongolele adjusts the speed of her hips, slowing them down and speeding them up, again emphasizing the importance of the lower body to her dance style. Reaching a crescendo, gyrating her hips as quickly as possible, the music stops and the piece comes to a sudden end as Tongolele takes a bow and the curtains close.

Appearing for her third and final dance number, Tongolele blends the African derived style of her first piece and the Tahitian inspired movements of her second. Waking to find herself within another large cage-like contraption, Tongolele is welcomed and carried to center stage by the bodies awaiting her arrival. Together, Tongolele and these male and female dancers move to the beat played by the drummers on stage. Starting slow, Tongolele repeats several of the Tahitian dance moves from her second piece; she steps side to side, moves in small circular patterns, softly sways her hips and draws attention to her fluid arm gestures. Behind her, the dancers perform a more vigorous vocabulary, repeating a series of high kicks and turns that coincide with the beat of the drum. As the tempo speeds up, the dancers continue to keep time with the music, executing a series of simple movements such as spins and arm extensions that do not draw attention away from Tongolele. In response to the faster beat, Tongolele shifts the focus towards her hips, primarily performing quick pelvic thrusts, rapid hip circles, level changes, and spins. Tongolele also includes occasional sidesteps (or guaguancó steps) and shoulder isolations as a way of giving her hips a rest and referencing her embodied knowledge of Afro-informed dance styles. Similar to the other two pieces, Tongolele continues these series of movements,

switching between her hips and the Afro-derived vocabulary until the music suddenly stops and she falls to the floor, signaling the end of the number.

Dancing Queer Time, Space and Race

Distilling the way in which the proscenium stage facilitates a reading of Tongolele's performance as queering notions of space and time, the set designs and costumes allow for the simultaneous indication of a place and a non-place. By this, I mean that while each performance conjures up geographical images, there is no specificity to the designs that link Tongolele to an actual city or town in Africa, Tahiti, Cuba, or anywhere else. Moreover, her appearance within these spheres of imagined geographies take place in an amorphous time without any tangible markers of her past, present or future. Rather, the stage facilitates the construction of an imaginary of what those places might be like, regardless of time; an imaginary reinforced through Tongolele's choreographies. In these numbers, Tongolele's rehearsed movements reveal her pre-meditated articulations of her fantasized non-places. This non-specificity of place contributes to a reading of Tongolele's exoticism as she is welcomed by these different communities, but does not seem to be from any of them. The importance of this is that while these dances depict Tongolele's origins, she really does not have any. As previously discussed in relation to the *rumberas* and depictions of Cubanness, this visually and spatially construction of Tongolele's origins signals not only what Mexican audiences believed about her, but also how her presence in film helped to solidify those beliefs. Effectively, the falsity upon which Tongolele gained fame is reinforced through her participation in Mexican cinema.

During the first piece, the set design merges Tongolele's present with a mercantilist past of cargo and foreign bodies. Constructed up-stage is the image of an Asian ship flanked by cargo boxes and the cage from which Tongolele emerges. This imagery functions to plant the idea that

Tongolele has been brought as a captive by the presumably Asian merchants to this new place, though the place and time are undefined. It is also unclear why the ship or its merchants are Asian, but their presence adds a layer of “Otherness” to this encounter, further complicating and enshrouding the true nature of Tongolele’s origins.³¹ It is important to note that aside from the Asian couple and Tongolele, all of these other bodies on stage are dark-skinned, which, compounded with the presence of a ship conjures up visions of the slave trade. However, diverging from descriptions of slave encounters such as Édouard Glissant’s “open boat,” these dark bodies are mobile, forceful and capable of protecting their territory.³² Juxtaposed against these bodies, it is Tongolele’s white body that is depicted as both merchandise and threatening to the already established community. Specifically, her entrance initiates the captive/captor relationship between her and the other bodies on stage that queers the historical model of slavery – light-skinned bodies subjugating dark-skinned peoples – as Tongolele’s white, female body is subjugated by the bare-chested, spear-wielding, dark-skinned men who encircle her as dark skinned women in white dresses look on.

This scene of aggression and passive watching also reveals a re-presentation of gender dynamics and queering of expectations. For example, that the women stand still in the background, static as the men actively threaten Tongolele, reveals a power dynamic already based on gender relations. While this static female seems powerless, reinforcing Mulvey’s binary

³¹ Though framed as an assessment of representations of foreignness in the film, Castro’s work, “Staging the Ends of the Nation in Latin American Classical Cinemas: Notes Towards and Alternative Methodology,” provides an interesting interpretation of the Asian characters as embodying fears about Mexico’s racial others. For Castro, that it is the Chinese magician who attempts to kill Tongolele represents anxieties and a “moralist allegory” of the threat these bodies pose to *mexicanidad* (162) Though he considers Tongolele as a “de-foreignized” body (160), which I am pushing against in my argument, his examination of the Asian presence in the film is compelling.

³² Glissant describes the terrible experience of slave forced mobility as one that not only caused the death of many, but also the loss of their past. In this sense, this loss of past, not only violently cuts off the possibility of Relation, but within the context of this analysis demonstrates the queering of biological and chronological relations. See Glissant, “experience of the abyss lies inside and outside the abyss. The torment of those who never escaped it: straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths they went” (7).

of the active male and passive female, her active looking on at Tongolele creates a fissure in this totalizing notion of the gendered male gaze. Simply by looking, these women are resisting the notion that they do not form part of the gaze, a kind of resistance that is also filtered through Tongolele's attempts at fighting off her male aggressors. This dynamic of passive female and active male becomes even more unbalanced by considerations of race: the dancer's presence as a light-skinned and mobile woman juxtaposes the non-threatening and non-moving dark-skinned women. Wearing a cheetah-print bikini only further emphasizes a sort of untamed and sexualized quality about Tongolele that the surrounding figures try to control by means of force. The way the piece ends, with Tongolele on the floor surrounded by the men and their spears, suggests her inability to escape a captive status. At the same time, her enactments of defiance break apart gendered expectations of the passive female body. Ultimately, this staged encounter creates a kind of aggrandized story about how she came to learn her African-inspired dance vocabulary during her captivity at the hands of these native bodies.

Expanding upon the dancer's mysterious past, the second piece very literally set the stage to explore her Tahitian roots. Gone are the ship and cargo, replaced by a vision of tropical trees, rope and mosquito netting that fills the back half of the stage. Though there is no indication of how anyone arrived nor where or when they exist, drummers and guitar players are situated within the props, reinforcing visual cues of tropical exoticism. This quality of tropical paradise is further enhanced by the enthusiasm the musicians and dancers express towards Tongolele, in contrast to the previous piece's enactment of aggression. The bare-chested drummers, with notably dark skin, are next to white male musicians dressed in little more than speedos. Although the costuming emphasizes this imagined tropical space where bodies are freely exposed, it also queers the gendered trend of sexualizing only the female body. Yet, the positioning of these men

upstage sends a message of containment, making them safe objects of onlookers and mediating fantasies of “Otherness” and of the exposed mestizo male. Furthermore, these fantasies are predicated upon the visually constructed imbalance of power between the seated dark skinned musicians and standing light skinned musicians. These level differences assert a kind of superiority of the mestizo body, also the more exposed body, over the dark “Other.”

In spite of the spatial attempts to quarantine sexualized racial and male bodies, their sonic vibrations of tropical Tahiti carry downstage, where more exposed mestizo male bodies, mestizo women wearing floral patterns and grass skirts, and Tongolele all move to the sounds that these musicians make. This sonic transcendence, much like in *El Rey del barrio*, emphasizes the musicians’ potential to disidentify with the cinematic attempt to control and separate bodies. Not only that, the sonic production serves as a mechanism through which the dark-skinned musicians again break with their script of social marginality and demonstrate a connection and importance to cultural practices. Additionally, in this downstage space that the dancers inhabit, the costumes and exposed bodies create a visual continuation of the images of paradise localized upstage. Combined with the centrally located pedestal, the dancers forefront the body as fundamental to this eroticized imaged.

Emerging from the large and cage-like contraption, Tongolele’s performance seems to transport her to a pre-modern time, again emphasizing a queering of chronological events and geographical markers. Looking closely at the structures on stage, between the contraption reminiscent of an ox or horse-drawn cart, quasi-permanent structures with roofs thatched out of hay, and a live fire, the scene depicts a kind of primitive existence. Yet again, as the only dark-skinned bodies on stage, the four drummers are positioned behind the fire, as if to also maintain a barrier between them, the uncivilized bodies, and the more refined dancing figures downstage.

That these dark bodies remain segregated and seated throughout the performance emphasizes the mobility of the lighter-skinned bodies that move freely around the stage, dancing alongside Tongolele. This division is also perceived visually through costumes. Wearing unbuttoned white shirts and white shorts, the dark musicians' outfits both expose their bodies and are simpler than those the dancers use. On one hand, the simple and battered quality of the costumes enhances the kind of remote sensation that the setting creates: that this pre-technological community has little interaction with outside influences. On the other hand, this simplicity of the dark musicians' costumes also establishes their difference from the lighter-skinned bodies downstage wearing floral-patterned fabric. Effectively, the clothing becomes only part of the costume that is used in this racial performance of drag, this construction of primitiveness and simplicity associated with black bodies.

Musical Interpretations of “Otherness”

Having discussed the way the spatial design and divisions of the proscenium stage allow for a queer reading of Tongolele's dance performance, the sounds emitted from the musical bodies are also fundamental in subverting racial stereotypes. While I have previously suggested in my analysis of her cabaret performance that the dark-skinned drummers are subjected to immobility, whenever light-skinned musicians are present during Tongolele's three pieces, they too are forced to remain static. To a certain extent, this lack of movement may be a reflection of the difficulty on playing an instrument and moving while doing so. However, I propose that the musicians' immobility has more to do with presenting their bodies as safely contained images of the “Other” or exposed body of the mestizo male. In spite of their physically contained position on-stage, the musicians are pivotal to the success of Tongolele's performance and expression of exoticism. That the sounds of these musicians extend outside the boundaries of their separation

reflects the potential to resist the dominant narrative of containment. Their importance as sonic contributors subverts their cinematic construction as a marginalized black body. As discussed in regards to *El Rey del barrio*, the three dance sequences of *Han matado a Tongolele* create a sonic space in which the musicians are able to not only resist, but also aurally disidentify with the deracination of the cinematic production, reinserting themselves sonically into the plot and Mexican society more generally.

Through their drumming rhythms, lyrics and guitar sounds, the musicians create a sonic link between the visual imaginary and dance repertoire of Tongolele's supposed origin sites. For example, in conjunction with the imaginary of primitive communities, the drumming itself can be heard as a call to Africa more directly, rather than just Afro-Cuban styles. As a way of racially affirming this musical connection to geographies outside of Mexican borders, all of the drummers are dark-skinned. Furthermore, these drummers are crucial to the way Tongolele moves; her fast-paced body isolations, steps and turns are rooted in the beat of the music. The importance of this is the way in which these "Other" bodies and their musical productions are presented as filtered through the more socially accepted light-skinned body. Moreover, Tongolele does not just embody the sounds of this Other, but fashions an entire identity based on a fascination with that Other. As such, Tongolele's performance of these dance styles is just one example of a constructing and exaggerating racial identity. This remains true even when the sonic stimulation is less percussive and more reminiscent of her interpretation of Tahitian sounds. For example, the voices and guitar sounds in her second dance number tell the audience the story of Tongolele's mythical arrival to Mexico. Describing "La isla de Tahiti" as a "paraíso bajo el sol" where Tongolele was born, sonically supports the visual imagery of tropical trees and flowers. Yet, as the musicians continue, one dark and rainy day, Tongolele was swept away

by “un viento enorme,” and landed in Mexico. As a way of remaining true to these fictional Tahitian roots, Tongolele uses dance to express an imagined place of strong winds and rolling waves.

From Exotic Sounds to (Homo)Erotic Visions

As an extension of the exoticism the musicians contribute to the overall performance, the camera is an essential tool in establishing a kind of cinematic gaze rooted in seeing these bodies not just as different, but also as sexualized. Though in reference to Hollywood cinema, Diawara argues, “that the dominant cinema situates black characters primarily for the pleasure of white spectators (male or female)” (“Black Spectatorship” 70). This idea can be extended and applied to the example of *Han matado a Tongolele* as the camera already revealed the primarily light-skinned audience at the beginning of the film. Presumably, following Monsiváis’ logic, this crowd also serves to reflect the film’s broader non-screen story mestizo audience. As such, the camera’s focus on both the dark skinned and light-skinned male bodies and situates them as objects of the audience’s desire. Yet, what is interesting about this desiring look is that it inverts the dominant cinematic practice of placing the female form at the center of the gaze. By zooming in on the bare-chested drummers and nearly naked guitar players, the camera creates a space in which these male bodies are not only desired, but also situated in the passive position, generally occupied by women. In this sense, the film facilitates a moment of disidentification with the dominant cinematic narrative of the active, looking male. Additionally, this act of looking at the male form allows for spectators themselves to resist the notion of the heterosexual male gaze.

Beyond this inversion of passive objects of desire in the film, I also want to signal the way this gaze suggests homoerotic looking. It is important to consider, as earlier discussed, that the camera mirrors the gaze of all of the men involved in the film’s production like the director

and cameramen. Hence, by zooming in on these bare-chested male figures, the camera proposes the possibility of a homosexual rupture in heterosexual looking. Specifically, this gaze is suggestive of the way even those working within cinema may have been homosexual themselves, which, of course, would have been scorned and rejected due to the prevalent narrative of being a macho Mexican. As a result, one way to push against this without having to publicly identify as homosexual, would have been to use filming techniques to filter sexual desire.

As the event's primary attraction, this is not only logical but also expected that Tongolele is the focus of the camera throughout much of her performances. Before being able to identify moments of oppositional gazing, I want to explore how the camera mirrors the male gaze, maneuvering around the stage and Tongolele's body in order to emphasize the woman as sexual object. As Mulvey states, "the beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylized and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film and the direct recipient of the spectator's look" (206). To more firmly situate the relationship between camera techniques and Mexico's cinematic rendering of the female form, Carlos Monsiváis explains, "el *close-up* certifica lascivia y hermosura, pone a la cámara al servicio de la serenidad o de los sacudimientos del rostro, y quebranta la esclavitud pregonada. El cine maltrata y minimiza a la mujer, el cine glorifica a los arquetipos femeninos" (*Espejo* 182). As a reflection of these two ideas, the camera's fragmented gaze presents the film's audience with an image of exotic perfection. As Tongolele first appears from within the cage, the camera isolates her beautiful and yet unexpressive face. This image is reinforced at the beginning of her final performance, again emerging from a captive position. Perhaps embodying the serenity Monsiváis mentions, or what Arturo Hernández describes as her characteristic "enigmática mirada," (94) these close-ups suggest Tongolele as a docile and

contained figure. In contrast to this image, the camera's rendering of her dancing constructs an image of a perfect body from which an eruption of movement is produced, prompting the applause, admiration and envy of the "live" spectators. Transitioning between a wide angle, side view and zoomed-in focus, what is noteworthy about the camera's angles, is that there is no 360-panoramic view of her performance. Rather, what the film's viewers see of Tongolele is relegated to a frontal or side-view of the stage. And yet, what this positioning offers the spectator is a consistent view of Tongolele's backside and fervently moving hips. This is made possible because as Tongolele moves quickly around the stage area, often turning in circles, the camera does not follow her to maintain a view of her front. As such, when the camera zooms in on the dancing Tongolele, the film's spectator often sees a doubly fragmented form: Tongolele as isolated from the surrounding bodies and Tongolele's body being reduced to its parts. This repeated projection of only half of Tongolele's body reinforces her sexual objectification by visually directing the spectator's focus to her hips. Moreover, separating a view of her body from a view of her face dehumanizes Tongolele; it allows her spectators to devalue her overall performance in favor of an erotic image of her body parts.

Much like in *El Rey del barrio*, the dancer is presented as an object that inspires desire in her male viewers. For example, before and after each performance, the camera diverts its attention from the stage to the audience, capturing the roaring applause and standing ovation of several male spectators. While there are also women cheering in the crowd, the camera emphasizes the presence and enthusiastic response from her male viewers, reinforcing the notion of the active male gaze. Furthermore, "behind the scenes" of the stage performance, the camera distills reactions to Tongolele's dancing through two of the film's main male protagonists: Tongolele's fiancé and the theatre owner. During the first piece, in a noticeable shift of the

camera's positioning, the gaze mirrors that of a group of male onlookers in the wings, including the fiancé and theatre owner. Watching from the side, the camera reveals the men's limited view of the performance area and Tongolele. Yet, as she approaches the up-stage area, the camera mimics an exchange between the dancer and her future husband, cutting from her dancing to a close-up of his face as the two make eye contact, smile and identify each other. This pleasure in seeing Tongolele is extended to the theatre owner and the other men, also smiling as they watch her from this viewing spot. During the second and third number, the owner and fiancé are again in this space, suggestive of a kind of an exclusive access to the performer the general audience lacks. What is important about this exclusive access is the way in which Tongolele returns the gaze towards these male figures, as if exerting agency in accepting their looking and even pleasure in being looked at. In this sense, she is not simply a passive object, but active in the negotiation of pleasure.

These male figures, however, are not the only bodies that watch Tongolele. As previously mentioned, the camera's lens captures women outside the theatre waiting to buy tickets and as figures occupying seats in the theatre. Much like their male counterparts, the camera reveals the way these female audience members gaze upon Tongolele's body and choreographies, applauding and giving her standing ovations as a way of expressing how much they enjoyed her work. In addition to these spectators, Tongolele has a female assistant who not only helps her prepare for the show and change costumes between performances, but also looks on from a similar exclusive vantage point as the fiancé and theatre owner. During the third, and final, dance number, the camera exposes just how taken this female assistant is with the performer; her gaze is so firmly directed towards the female dancer that she does not notice someone has tried to poison Tongolele's water. In these female onlookers, their gaze and enjoyment of Tongolele's

performances reflect an alternative to the non-screen story discourses about the dancer as diabolical and a threat to morality. Rather, the intensity of the gaze and continued watching suggests an oppositional gaze, one that finds pleasure in seeing a woman able to express and exert herself on stage. Moreover, as in *El Rey del barrio*, these Teatro Follies female spectators may embody non-screen story women who also refused to identify with the strict categories of acceptable female prototypes.

In spite of the audience members who take pleasure in watching Tongolele, there are some whose gaze reveals anger towards her: the magician and his wife. As Mulvey explains, “the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified” (205), which can be applied to the response of these two characters. Standing on the ship’s staircase during the first performance, the camera zooms in on the magicians face as Tongolele first begins her dance and as she exchanges loving glances with her fiancé. In both of these instances, the camera shows a look of enraged envy rather than what Mulvey would describe as anxiety. I suggest this description because the plot revolves around his desire to kill Tongolele, a desire rooted in his inability to possess her love and affection. Furthermore, these feelings of rage extend to the magician’s wife and accomplice. Seeing the dancer as a risk to her marriage and her husband’s sanity, the magician’s wife tries to poison Tongolele’s water, taking advantage of the assistant’s enraptured gaze. Thus, these (re)actions escalate beyond a general anxiety towards Tongolele and her dancing, hyperbolizing the non-screen story commentaries about Tongolele. Rather, the magician and his wife seek to use violence as a way of eradicating the *exótica* (also read desire).

Conclusion

Whether dancing on the cabaret stage or within the context of Mexican cinematic productions, Tongolele is a prime example of the ways in which anxieties and conceptions about femininity, race and exoticism converge within the context of 1940s and 1950s Mexico. Referred to as an *exótica* both because of her foreign status and her non-Mexican dance repertoire, Tongolele cemented her status in popular memory by performing notions of a sexualized “Other.” At stake in this construction is both her ability to exaggerate aspects of her own femininity but also how it expressed her imagined conceptions of what Afro-Cuban and Tahitian communities were like, having never traveled to Cuba or Tahiti to study dance. The danger in Tongolele’s improvised and choreographed dancing is the way it not only affirms preconceived notions of other cultures as primitive and intriguing, but illustrates just how easily race is constructed and worn like any other costume. At the same time, what is important about these fantasies enacted through dance are what they reveal about the possibility to challenge totalizing efforts to establish an image of the ideal Mexican. Specifically, inside the space of the cabaret, Tongolele’s scantily clad body, relationship with her musicians and their connection to the audience facilitated an opportunity to break down racial and sexualized boundaries of the woman as either mother or whore and the invisibility of black bodies in Mexico’s history.

Utilizing filmic renditions of Tongolele’s performance style, however, complicates a reading of how her dancing and the cabaret space facilitated potential subversive acts. Participating in an industry that sought to present acceptable styles of dress, behaviors and modes of speech in order to mold the ideal model of *mexicanidad* would seem to strip Tongolele of any power to challenge the system. Yet, utilizing the notion of disidentification, as proposed by José Esteban Muñoz and the act of oppositional gazing, as suggested by bell hooks, I have suggested moments of fissure and ruptures filtered through her role in the films *El Rey del barrio*

and *Han matado a Tongolele*. Employing the idea of disidentification, my analysis of Tongolele's performances has explored how performers enact resistances, no matter how large or small, to the totalizing project of Mexican cinema. Ranging from Tongolele's rejection of Tin Tán's advances to the way the separated musician's sonic production travels throughout the space, whether intentional or not, these moments offer an alternative to efforts of deracination and projections of passive femininity. Furthermore, as cinematic endeavors, the role of the gaze has been central to examining when Tongolele reinforces the stereotypical active male/passive female exchange, as suggested by Laura Mulvey, and when there are challenges to this sexualized binary. More specifically, the presence of a presumably "live" audience in both films has allowed for a discussion of the female gaze towards both sexualized images of male bodies and towards Tongolele. These moments of non-heterosexual male looking hold the potential for spectators, both within and outside of the screen story, to oppose the cinematic narrative of male desire. Ultimately, Tongolele's bodily articulations function as a conduit for examining acts of resistance and possibilities towards re-imagining a more inclusive experience of *mexicanidad*.

Chapter 2:**Tra(n)s el tiempo: Tito Vasconcelos' Queer Temporality, Drag Transformations and Musical Interventions**

Although I had seen photographs and recordings of Tito Vasconcelos' work before the 2013 International Festival of Cabaret in Mexico City, when he appeared on stage, I had no idea who he was. This prompts the question: How is that possible? The answer is fairly simple. When Vasconcelos took the stage, he did not appear as himself but as Mexico's current First Lady, Angélica Rivera. Also known to her public as La Gaviota, a reference to her role in a popular telenovela, Vasconcelos re-created her image by wearing a long blonde wig, sunglasses and dressed in a blazer and skirt. So, when he asked the audience if we knew who she was, almost all of us obligingly said yes. I do not remember much else of what Vasconcelos said on stage that day because I was so focused on that question: Do you know who I am? I understood the question and knew the answer he was looking for, but I was trying to figure out who was underneath the costume. After attending a handful of festival events, the appearance of "La Gaviota" or "Enrique Peña Nieto" before festival performances, as I had come to realize, was the norm. With either one or both appearing before every show, I had begun to recognize the performers as belonging to certain theatre groups. However, this figure, commanding the stage, was new; although the fitted suit and expertly applied makeup were convincing, this Gaviota was definitely older than the others I had seen. It wasn't until the end of Vasconcelos' interaction with the audience that it became clear who he was. As a former mentor of Las Reinas Chulas, Vasconcelos was in Tlalpan to introduce their last performance of the festival as well as to invite the audience to celebrate post-festival performances in his bar, Cabaré-Tito.

This on-stage appearance, dressed in drag, is not a singular event for Vasconcelos, but rather, is one of his performative hallmarks. Born in 1950 in Oaxaca, Tito Vasconcelos moved to Mexico City to study theatre and has since become a prominent figure in Mexico City's cultural and nightlife environments. His versatility as an actor, radio host, foundational figure in the resurgence of *teatro-cabaret*, theatre scholar, bar owner and gay rights activist all signal his performative and intellectual presence within the capital city. This long list of contributions undoubtedly makes Vasconcelos an interesting figure for study, as both Gastón Alzate and Antonio Prieto Stambaugh reveal in their works on the actor-intellectual-activist. Through their descriptions of the way Vasconcelos brings to life popular characters from television shows and politics, but with a socially conscious message, Alzate and Prieto Stambaugh seem to assert that this is part of what has made him popular with audiences. Moreover, as both authors indicate, Vasconcelos uses drag to appear not just as any well-known figures, but as well-known female figures, which seems to fascinate and entertain audiences.

Yet, for me, what makes him compelling is his absence from the stage in recent years. Although he is currently resurrecting his piece, *La pasión según Tito*,³³ celebrating its eighteen-year anniversary, Vasconcelos rarely performs live anymore. This obviously poses a challenge to exploring contemporary pieces of his work, but it also makes renderings of his previous performances all the more intriguing. More specifically, his only theatre work available in its entirety online is *Martita, Primera Dama* from the 2001 Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics Encuentro in Monterrey, Mexico. Otherwise, Vasconcelos' theatre work is unattainable in the virtual realm, such as through YouTube clips or videos on Facebook. Because of this, I rely on recorded sources to examine Vasconcelos' performance style. More specifically,

³³ See "La pasión según Tito" 2015.

I explore *Martita, Primera Dama* (2001) as well as Vasconcelos' appearance as Susy in the acclaimed film, *Danzón* (1991).

Aside from the accessibility of these two works, I have chosen them because they capture Vasconcelos' versatility as an actor as well as the way his personal life influences his artistic decisions. As Gastón Alzate explains, "Vasconcelos se ha destacado como activista en favor de los derechos de la comunidad gay y de hecho es considerado como uno de sus líderes más visibles. Así mismo ha formado parte desde hace más de 20 años del movimiento de liberación LGBT" (*Teatro 2*). It is, then, by channeling his experiences as a homosexual man and gay rights activist that Vasconcelos' work attempts not to dismantle, but to re-articulate and challenge the negative stereotypes associated with non-heteronormative Mexican bodies.

Much like the previous chapter, recorded versions allow me to repeat and replay segments, to relive a performance, but also carry with them more complicated considerations of who is filming, implications for the actor's autonomy and audience base. Additionally, comparing a cinematic performance versus a theatre work requires a more careful consideration of audience reception than working with two cinematic pieces. For example, the centrality of drag aesthetics to Vasconcelos' performances calls for an interrogation of how much liberty Vasconcelos had in his cinematic appearance versus producing his own theatre piece. Moreover, this element is important for thinking about how spectators, especially those aware of his previous work versus those who know very little of the actor, respond to his gendered transformations. This is especially significant for examining the way cinema holds the possibility to reach people of vastly different sexualities, religious beliefs and socio-economic classes. This is made possible because of its more cost-inclusive nature and its ability to be replayed via DVDs, television or the Internet. Considering *Danzón* (1991), which won many awards and was

shown widely within Mexico as well as internationally, Vasconcelos' appearance undoubtedly reached an audience base far beyond the possibilities of theatre. In contrast, theatre can be more exclusionary and limited in reach due to ticket costs and its ephemeral nature. For example, his *teatro-cabaret* works, though some have been presented outside of Mexico City like *Martita*, *Primera Dama* (2001), most are localized within the confines of the capital. Even more specifically, most have been presented in the Coyoacán neighborhood, drawing a smaller crowd of more affluent and educated spectators.³⁴ Ultimately, what is noteworthy about Vasconcelos' performances in both film and theatre is that his re-working of noteworthy figures are able to reach a varied and vast audience.

Theorizing Queer Time, Gender and Sounds

By means of the *teatro-cabaret* piece and his short appearance in *Danzón* (1991), I analyze Tito Vasconcelos' use of drag practices and their relationship to music as acts of not just embodied expression, but of embodied resistance that draw upon and modify historical performance models. By looking towards the past, to *revista* and *carpa* theatre traditions and to popular cinematic genres of Mexico's Golden Age, Vasconcelos transforms his body into a vehicle for articulating social, sexual and political critiques of the Mexican experience. Hence, by utilizing drag practices, the actor queers not only his body, but also subverts and destabilizes the heteronormative expectations set forth by these past cultural productions. By analyzing the cabaret scene from the film *Danzón* (1991) in conjunction with his *teatro-cabaret* piece, *Martita*, *Primera Dama* (2001), I am able to consider performative continuities on-screen and on-stage.

³⁴ Through the late 1990s and into the early 2000s, Vasconcelos worked with Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe to present theatre in a small theatre known as *El Hábito*. Here, in this small theatre in Coyoacán, Vasconcelos performed several politically engaged theatre works on his own and with Rodríguez. See Taylor 1993; Alzate 2002. Though little has been written about the public who attended this theatre, in its current form, under the ownership of Las Reinas Chulas, tickets cost between \$20-30 USD, which is far beyond the typical Mexican's financial means.

Specifically, Vasconcelos uses drag to create a continuum of not only gender presentations but also, in a more literal application of the term drag, to facilitate a continuum of chronology. Additionally, the way music is both central to the performance itself and deeply relies on drag, creates what I call queer musical interventions. Concretely speaking, considering together the cabaret scene in which Vasconcelos appears in full drag, reminiscent of past *cabaretera* vixens, as well as his drag transformations into another First Lady, Marta Sahagún, and Lucha Reyes, the actor queers these well-known female figures of political and popular culture. Moreover, through drag, Vasconcelos reveals the sense of fabrication that underlies constructing notions of femininity itself.

Beyond simply performing gendered drag, Vasconcelos also employs temporal drag to re-organize time, transporting his film and theatre viewers between present and past moments via these visual cues. Further enhancing the visual and chronological sensations of shifting between moments in time, music also functions to aurally disorient spectators. In other words, using the sounds of *danzón* and the *ranchera*, audiences not only experience what *mexicanidad* was supposed to look like throughout the years, but also what it was supposed to sound like. And yet, by means of both lip-syncing and live singing, Vasconcelos proposes an equally queer auditory experience for his viewers, destabilizing the soundscape as much as the visual appearance of gender. Ultimately, these two pieces provide a rich source of exploration into the connections Vasconcelos makes between drag and musical performance as well as how he uses these performance models to re-present notions of Mexican identity.

I will develop the importance of the *cabaretera* and *fichera* film genre's as they would have informed the way Vasconcelos opposed the totalizing gendered narratives of the film industry, and by default, the socio-cultural expectations of the man/woman binary. By opposed, I

am utilizing bell hook's notion of the oppositional gaze, meaning that, as a spectator, Vasconcelos does not accept the on-screen narratives of the fallen woman as object or caricature of the homosexual man. Moreover, by not identifying with the screen story characters, this oppositional viewing creates "intermediary spaces, during the process of identification, where the spectator recuperates his/her identities and interrupts the symbolic system of a master narrative" (Diawara, "Black British Cinema" 36). What I propose is that Vasconcelos' opposition ruptures the master narrative of homosexuality and homosexuals as objects or caricatures rather than positive and fully formed characterizations of heterosexual men. Moreover, his inability to fully accept these narrowly conceived views of gender and sexuality reaffirmed his identity as an outsider.

This position of rejecting dominant discourses holds the potential for Vasconcelos to exist not on the outside, but within what Jack Halberstam refers to as a "queer time and space." The importance of this is the way Vasconcelos participates in a mainstream cultural endeavor, while at the same time, maintains his position on the margins, opposing totalizing and exclusionary visions of *mexicanidad*. But more than what Halberstam calls a "queer way of life,"³⁵ Vasconcelos' queer performative endeavors disidentify with the cinematic images he has opposed and watched his whole life. I am using José Esteban Muñoz's notion of disidentification, which proposes that performance serves as a kind of survival strategy for those on the outside "to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere" (4). These performances, or acts of disidentification work "within and outside of the dominant public sphere simultaneously" (5). In Vasconcelos' case, by transforming his opposition to cinema's representations of gay

³⁵ Halberstam states, "In this book, the queer 'way of life' will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being" (*Queer Time and Place* 1).

characters into artistic inspiration, his performances are disidentifications. Moreover, his role in the film *Danzón* reflects an act of resistance from within majoritarian productions of popular culture while his *teatro-cabaret* productions capture his dedication to remaining on and connection to the minority groups in the margins.

I focus on the central component of Vasconcelos' disidentificatory practices, his interpretation of female celebrities through musical and drag performance. Specifically, I explore his re-presentation of the Golden Age *rumbera* in the film *Danzón* and legendary *ranchera* singer, Lucha Reyes and former First Lady, Marta Sahagún in his *teatro-cabaret* work, *Martita, Primera Dama*. What do these figures have in common? I suggest he honed in on these women because, for better or worse, all were subject to intense scrutiny and criticism for being sexual bodies. At the same time, they captivated the nation by means of this sexuality. Though Sahagún is a more contemporary figure and both the *rumbera* and Reyes belong to early twentieth-century history, all three have made undeniable contributions to shaping Mexico's socio-cultural expectations. Thus, by re-presenting these women, Vasconcelos exposes how the past and present collide in and through his body.

Utilizing Elizabeth Freeman's concept of temporal drag, the historical references embodied through Vasconcelos and in his work forefront the way the past "pulls" on the present ("Time Binds" 62). The implication of this is that it creates a hybrid expression of time while simultaneously expressing how "time, then, not only 'binds' flesh into bodies and bodies into social but also appears to 'bind' history's wounds" (*Time Binds* 7). In the case of Vasconcelos' work, it captures Mexico's history of wounding of non-heteronormative bodies by excluding them from narratives created and proliferated mainly via the nation's cultural productions, which remain influential into the present day. His literal dragging up the past functions "as one of these

alternatives, that is, as a counter-genealogical practice of archiving culture's throwaway objects, including the outmoded masculinities and femininities from which usable pasts may be extracted" (*Time Binds* xxiii). While the Golden Age of Cinema is far from being a throwaway object, Vasconcelos' interpretation of its prescribed femininity critiques how this outdated form of understanding gender and sexuality remains part of defining the nation and notions of *mexicanidad*. This looking backward would, for Judith Butler, lack subversive qualities because "repetitions with any backwards-looking force, on the other hand, are merely 'citational,' and can only thereby consolidate the authority of a fantasized original" ("Packing History" 728). However, as Freeman's notion of temporal drag suggests, Vasconcelos' citationality of the past does not simply consolidate an authorized vision. Rather, by re-creating the past, Vasconcelos is able to "interrogate the ideals of the past" that he performs (Eschen 32),³⁶ which still informs Mexico's present, as perceived in recent popular films and telenovelas. The power of Vasconcelos' drag temporality is precisely its break with conventional and heteronormative expectations of chronology, and that by looking backward, he re-dresses the wounds of the past in a newly fashioned present.

Re-dressing the wounds via representations of women like La Gaviota, Marta Sahagún, *rumberas*, la doctora Tatiana Ilhuicamina, Sarah Bernhardt and Joan Crawford³⁷ points to a certain kind of female figure that Vasconcelos prefers to bring to life: icons. Expanding upon the idea of citing famous figures as a way to question the values of the past, I also want to explore the importance of iconicity. While providing a history of the term's development and usage is outside the scope of this project, I am engaging with the recent work of Jean Graham-Jones on

³⁶ The kind of drag Vasconcelos performs, and the challenge it poses to Butler's issue with citationality is not unique to him, but is a general phenomenon in drag culture. Nonetheless, the connection between representing a famous figure and re-imagining them as a site for potential change is an important component of not just Vasconcelos' drag, but also the work of famous drag performer, Lypsinka and artist, El Vez. See Eschen 2008.

³⁷ For these last three figures, see Prieto 2000.

performances of Evita and other popular female Argentine figures. By examining various performances, she applies the term icon, and through its relationship to gender, she suggests the notion of female iconicity as central to examining re-presentations of these famous females. Yet, throughout her analysis, Graham-Jones does not consider how drag itself is a practice with a long history of performing famous females, nor how performing these Argentine icons can be read as queer acts. At the same time, her work is useful for thinking through the political power of citational drag re-presentations, such as those Vasconcelos performs. According to Graham-Jones, “gendering plays a determinant role in the iconic and iconographic performances of my subjects, and accordingly I build upon recent discussions of representation and reconstruction of the female body as the site of national myth-making and iconography and of the performed construction of memory” (8). This link between gender, myth making and memory is useful for my own analysis. As discussed in my previous chapter, the role of the *cabaretera* and *rumbera* female bodies was not only fundamental to Mexico’s idealization of gendered behaviors, but is also inextricable from contemporary memories of a Golden Age past. Furthermore, depicting the *rumbera* figure as well as legendary *ranchera* singer, Lucha Reyes, and Mexico’s former first Lady, Marta Sahagún points to Vasconcelos’ conscious use of iconic women as the basis for his male-to-female drag transformations. Vasconcelos’ re-presentations via drag aesthetics subversively challenge the myths and memories that each woman embodies and, as a result, offers the possibility to reconsider foundational connections between gender and *mexicanidad*.

As part of bringing to life his female figures of past and present, Tito Vasconcelos engages with gendered drag transformation. Because of his male-to-female crossings, it is important to recognize that Vasconcelos is not a drag queen, but rather, a theatre performer who utilizes drag as part of his performance aesthetic. While this might seem superfluous, it is a

worthwhile distinction to make: as in the case of the U.S.-based performer, Charles Busch, for Vasconcelos, “theatre [is] first, drag second. And depending on who is talking- queens or theatre people – the reaction to that notion can be quite strong” (Julian Fleisher cited in Niles 36). Sharing in Busch’s inspiration from and instruction with Charles Ludlam,³⁸ Vasconcelos’ work often mirrors descriptions of Busch’s efforts to depict female stars on the theatre stage. For example, Busch’s male-to-female drag, described not as reflecting “grotesque physicality” or invented characters, but rather, as combining humor, “glamorous image[s] of femininity” and a “collage of behavior that suggests a fascinating theatrical diva” like those from popular culture (Niles 37) could also function as an apt depiction of Vasconcelos’ style of drag and theatre. Yet, it is the way Vasconcelos’ transformations could “pass” as not only being female but also as performances of the stars themselves that blurs the line between drag queen and theatre performer. Stemming from Ester Newton’s seminal work on drag queens in the United States, the term “female impersonators,” describes men who perform aggrandized imitations of usually famous women. Newton claims, “as female impersonators see it, ‘beauty’ is the closest approximation, in form and movement, to the mass media images of glamorous women” (43). According to Daniel Harris, these female impersonators have a long history of performances “rooted in the culture of mass celebrity” allowing the drag queen to live out “our deepening obsession with Hollywood and Broadway” (65). In similar fashion, I suggest that Vasconcelos’ combines theatre and drag to live out an obsession with leading ladies of Mexico’s Golden Age and imagine a new kind of stardom based on questioning gendered norms. Part of this questioning is transmitted via Vasconcelos’ visible dismantling of his impersonated character; he

³⁸ As Alzate explains, after his formal theatre training at the National Autonomous University of Mexico, “realizó estudios de actuación en la ciudad de Nueva York en donde conoció a Charles Ludlam quien es quizá, desde de sus influencias contemporáneas, la más clara” (*Teatro* 131).

reveals to spectators an in-between state, demonstrating fluidity between male and female genders. In addition, this in-betweenness is important because of the way it foregrounds the artifice of creating an image, much like the women he re-presents fashioned their own public personas.

Crucial to bringing the elements of temporal and gendered drag of Vasconcelos' work into dialogue with one another is music. As a performative tool and embodied strategy, music completes Vasconcelos' efforts to drag onto and transmit through his body different historical moments and popular figures. While I will concurrently explore the use of other performance elements such as costuming, makeup, set design, humor, language and audience reception, Gastón Alzate and Antonio Prieto Stambaugh have examined these components in their writings on Vasconcelos. As a result, I primarily focus on the queering of musical performance in relation to drag as a way of considering compounding expressions of subversion. Like the acts of many drag queens, Vasconcelos uses lip-syncing as part of his cinematic representation of the historical *rumbera*. Mouthing the lyrics to "El Coquero," sung by Ana María Fernández, the sonic emission of female timbre completes the visual crossing. In contrast, in his *teatro-cabaret* performance, Vasconcelos demonstrates more versatility, visually and aurally, as he enacts a spectrum of gender representations. Dressed as former First Lady, the figure on stage is made complete by Vasconcelos' musical talents, singing the story of her desires and emotions. However, the vocal range is not one completely reminiscent of female tones, reflecting a break in total transformation. This break becomes more of a complete rupture as he performs a musical set, dragging Lucha Reyes onto his body. Matching the vocal androgyny, Vasconcelos' body is dressed to reveal both male and female characteristics, no longer passing as an imitation, but as demonstrative of gender fluidity.

Vasconcelos and Mexico's *revista* and *carpa* Traditions

Much like the early twentieth-century theatre forms, *carpa* and *revista*, Tito Vasconcelos utilizes humor, contemporary political events and a sketch-like format as a basis for his productions. As Socorro Merlín details, a particularly “Mexican” element of the *revista* genre was precisely its attention to and critique of current events; “la revista evolucionará hasta volverse mexicana, cuando los acontecimientos sociopolíticos de 1910 permiten representar hechos y personajes en forma satírica, dando libre expresión al humor de tiples y actores” (2). According to Gastón Alzate, this practice continues through Vasconcelos’ contemporary work “por los elementos escénicos mediante los cuales un actor se pone en contacto con el público común, teniendo como tema las noticias de la política y la sexualidad” (*Teatro* 132). Yet, by mentioning sexuality, Alzate also signals the way Vasconcelos’ approach to theatre is both deeply informed by the models of the past as well as by his experiences in the present as a homosexual man. However, affected by the end of the Mexican Revolution, *carpa* and *revista* quickly evolved into productions primarily based on sketches rather than complete plot lines; “al principiar el año de 1931 ya se oye hablar del *sketch* en los teatros y en las carpas” (Merlín 9). An important element of the sketch was its ability to free actors from memorizing lines, creating a broader sense of improvisation and freedom on stage (Merlín 9). This is also perceived in Vasconcelos’ theatre, as Alzate suggests, “si tuviéramos que dar una visión global de la obra dramática de Tito Vasconcelos diríamos que su cabaret revive los resortes del teatro popular a la vez que se basa en una dramaturgia en la que los actores dejan de estar supeditados a la tiranía del texto” (“Capocomicato” 4).

Aside from the shortened segments and improvisation, the other major shift in content was a nationalist sentiment. As Merlín explains, this sentiment was accentuated through the

depiction of “las canciones y los bailes folklóricos, tomando como bandera el nacionalismo de esos años que estimula la representación de signos plásticos, corporales, musicales y de vestuario, referentes a los hábitos, costumbres y oficios indígenas” (3).³⁹ This aspect of representing images of *mexicanidad*, here has also been fundamental in shaping not only the themes of Vasconcelos’ productions, but also the use of visual and sonic cues.

In addition to the importance of political themes and humorous delivery, music was a fundamental performative tool that allowed *carpa* and *revista* productions to forge connections between their audience, performers and the performance. As previously mentioned, the shift towards combining a variety of sketches made musical numbers and musical accompaniment a more frequent element in post-Revolution *carpa* and *revista* works. Additionally, the role of Agustín Lara was undeniably influential in conjoining visual representations with the sounds of modern Mexico. According to María y Campos:

la aparición, durante el año 1930, de Agustín Lara como autor de música para obras teatrales, debe registrarse en esta crónica histórica con la categoría que este suceso tiene, porque aunque Lara no escribió propiamente partituras ‘políticas’, en el éxito que sus canciones alcanzaban fue uno de los factores para que el éxito de las revistas con estos temas se resolviera en forma arrolladora (351).

As Alejandro Madrid’s work suggests, musical styles in the post-revolutionary period of 1920-1950 served to create an aural expression of *mexicanidad*.⁴⁰ What Modern Mexico sounds like has a direct implication for understanding the role of music within the cabaret genres and later cinema productions. Agustín Lara was one of the musical pioneers who fused the Cuban style of *danzón* performance with Mexico’s romantic song tradition, giving rise to a distinctly Mexican form of the *bolero* (Moore *Music* 130). Not only a rising star in the *revista* and *carpa*

³⁹ Sonia León makes a similar assertion in her work about the *carpa* and *revista* post-Revolution, “en la que se acentuaba el mexicanismo a través de paisajes, vestimentas, canciones, etc. Se puede decir, que este género al tiempo que difunde las ideas nacionalistas, también es un reflejo de una sociedad que se encuentra en estado de búsqueda y afirmación de una identidad.”

⁴⁰ See Madrid 2008.

communities, Lara transitioned to film, again as one of the foremost musical composers. As Mark Pedelty suggests, “just as the shows in earlier “Review Theatre” were based on bolero song titles, so too, many of the cabaret-era films entitled and developed around bolero themes. Lara’s film inspirations included: ‘Aventurera,’ ‘Palabras de Mujer,’ ‘Pecadora,’ and many others” (41). Aside from Lara’s prolific number of compositions, Afro-Cuban rhythms important to the *rumberas*, the emphatic *ranchera* sound, and mariachi trio also gained increasingly popularity through cinematic productions. Taking these musical influences into account in Vasconcelos’ work, I focus on his performance of *danzón* and *ranchera* sounds as the ways in which the actor invokes and re-interprets the sounds of modern Mexico to question its gender/nationalism construct.

Similar to the turn of the century theatre productions, Vasconcelos continues the use of male-to-female drag transformation in his works on screen and on stage. As David Lida explains, Vasconcelos first dressed in drag for the Mexican Drama Critics’ Awards in 1977 and has continued to almost exclusively perform in drag ever since (“Activist” 101). Though scholarship on *revista* and *carpa* practices identify several instances of female-to-male re-presentations, which I will address in my subsequent chapter, male-female constructions are less commonly written about. Yet, Julio Chávez’s, *Vestidas y desvestidas: 50 años en la farándula de México* offers a cursory view into the historical presence of male-female cross-dressing and drag aesthetics in *carpa* and *revista* productions. Chávez signals Francisco Valdez Vázquez, otherwise known by his artistic name, Ruva D’val, as the “travesti pionero en el México de los años cuarenta” (225), dancing in *carpa* productions. Chávez also writes that during the 1950s, a transvestite from Monterrey named Shalimar made a name for herself in the “cabarets de segunda” in Mexico City (234). Furthermore, Alzate’s *Teatro de Cabaret: Imaginarios*

Disidentes, includes a chapter on the well-known drag queen, Francis, who appeared on countless cabaret stages and television series. At stake in mentioning these trans figures is how they reveal a subversive trend in Mexican theatre history as well as allow me to demonstrate the drag-based performatic link between Tito Vasconcelos' work and cabaret practices of the past.

Cabareteras and Ficheras: Vasconcelos' Oppositional Gaze

Born in 1950, during the height of Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema, Tito Vasconcelos was undoubtedly exposed from a very early age to the quintessential figure of the *rumbera* and her appearance in cinematic genres such as the *cabaretera*. While the previous chapter discussed the figure of the *rumbera* in relation to national anxieties about race and exoticism, this chapter explores her as a central figure in Mexico's changing attitudes towards female sexuality. Though these changing attitudes were firmly grounded in heterosexual practices and Mexican machismo, the *cabaretera* genre began to break open the stringent binary of virgin/whore by depicting women who actively asserted their sexuality. These films began to dismantle narratives of the perfect and ideal nation that in all reality was becoming more entrenched in political and economic corruption. As a result, by examining these films and Vasconcelos' relationship as a viewer, I propose moments of oppositional gazing that later transformed into his performative acts of disidentification.

The rise in popularity of the *cabaretera* films is intimately linked to the role of beautiful dancing women as well as the way these productions captured a growing sense of uncertainty about Mexico's traditional conceptions of family and class divisions. As Mexican film scholar David R. Maciel explains, "these narratives showcased the beauty and dancing talent of new stars such as Meche Barba, Rosa Carmina, María Antonieta Pons, Ninón Sevilla, and

Tongolele.⁴¹ In melodrama, familiar themes and issues resonated with audiences” (34). These familiar issues and themes, as Carl J. Mora asserts, were connected to the emergence of a new Mexican elite benefiting from economic growth under President Miguel Alemán. As Mora states, “the new elites, however, lacked the ingrained conservatism of their forebears and their lack of total commitment to the old ethical and sexual codes is interestingly reflected in the wave of *cabaretera* films of this period. The settings for these motion pictures were the cheap night clubs of the capital and their luckless *ficheras* or B-girls” (85). What Mora does not explicitly state, but implies, is this new elite’s interest in seeing women exert agency over their sexuality; “the Mexican cabareteras were spaces that foregrounded desire and sexuality; in fact, the cabaretera was one site in which female sexuality could be expressed in Mexican society” (Herschfield 79). Nonetheless, Mora’s “luckless” description of these women points to their own downtrodden economic situation, signaling a contradiction between the way these on-screen women employed their sexuality as a means of survival and the population of elites who enjoyed watching them do so.

Although the *cabaretera* films allowed female sexuality to be seen, their narratives of this sexuality were rooted in the image of the “fallen” woman, reinforcing notions of women as weak and reliant on male desire for survival. As Joanne Hirschfield suggests, “the cabaretera attempted to update the La Malinche paradigm of the ‘bad woman’ in order to assimilate the Mexican working-class woman whose newfound social and economic power challenged the male’s traditional position of superiority” (*Mexican Cinema* 79). Yet, being forced into a situation of prostitution or adultery does not really emphasize liberation via this “newfound” power of sexual agency. Rather, as Carlos Monsiváis suggests, “en la metamorfosis del melodrama dos emblemas

⁴¹ Note that even film critic Maciel situates Tongolele within this genre though she was not a *rumbera*.

del cambio son la prostituta, que es ya el “ángel caído por trepidante”, y el ama de casa que opta por el adulterio para que no la asfixie su pasividad” (*Espejo* 185). This 1950s representation of the woman who enters into prostitution or adulterous relations of her own accord seems only to substantiate Ana López’s suggestion that “Mexican culture always celebrated the myth of the prostitute, but in the 20s the prostitute also assumed a different iconic status in the wildly popular romantic visions of singer-composer Agustín Lara” (“Tears” 159). As López details, these romantic visions served to promote “a fatalistic worship of the ‘fallen woman’ as the only possible source of pleasure for modern man” (“Tears” 159). So, unfortunately, despite the possibilities the *cabaretera* films created for women to exercise sexual desires, these acts were still very much rooted in a pervasive social construction of the prostitute as an object of male desire.

What is most important about these *cabaretera* films and their *rumberas* is the way they facilitated the creation of sexualized female icons while at the same time critiquing the very social structures that made their iconicity possible. Out of all the previously mentioned *rumberas* and possible filmic examples, I want to briefly discuss Cuban-born Ninón Sevilla because her roles in some of the most well known *cabaretera* films fortified a particular aesthetic that guides my discussion of how *Danzón* and Tito Vasconcelos re-construct this model. As the “queen of the *cabareteras*” (Mora 86), Sevilla’s roles as a beautiful *rumbera* using her dancing body and sexuality when down on her luck is the epitome of the *cabaretera* genre. Most well known for her roles in *Sensualidad* and *Aventurera*, Sevilla portrays a young girl’s fall from grace into the underbelly of prostitution cabarets (Mora 86). As Monsiváis claims, “Ninón Sevilla en *Aventurera* (1950), *Sensualidad* (1951), *Aventura en Río* (1953), *Revancha* (1948), es la vamp que no pudo darse en los años veinte y es la ‘trampa mortal’ en donde se precipitan los desertores

del cielo de la decencia” (*Espejo* 186). With her blonde hair, light skin and eye-catching costumes, Sevilla’s body stands in for not only a “safe” image of exotica and desire, but also becomes the iconic image of the *cabaretera*. Not only is she a vamp and seductress, but the film’s narrative also contributes to the long-lasting cultural importance of these films. As Mora asserts, the film *Aventurera* was “lauded as the epitome of the genre, transcending its melodramatic strictures. Directed by Alberto Gout and written by Alvaro Custodio, the film treated middle-class morality as a hypocritical sham and represented Mexican society as being thoroughly corrupt” (87). The importance of this shift in filmic narratives applauding the Mexican nation and its post-Revolutionary society is the way in which it opens the door for later genres to more fully pull apart these foundational fictions.

Highlighting this shift in filmic narratives, the 1970s and 1980s experienced a noteworthy juxtaposition between the declining number and quality of films produced and their exploration of uncharted thematic territory. Of specific interest for this chapter is the post-*cabaretera* genre known as the *fichera* and increased presence of homosexual figures on the big-screen. During the 1930s, the on-screen women who worked in the cabarets “collecting tokens based upon the number of dances or drinks requested by their clients and who also engaged in prostitution” were called *ficheras* (Schulz-Cruz 14). By the 1970s, the term became attached to a new kind of cinema genre, that apart from its nudity, also “included the presentation of the presumed homosexual” (Schulz-Cruz 14). As film scholar Bernard Schulz-Cruz notes, “between the years 1970 and 1999, as homosexuals searched for information about themselves, they were also rediscovering and reinventing themselves” (21). As part of this exploration, cinematic representations of masculinity and acceptable male figures began to gradually change, as perceivable in *fichera* productions. While this shift was not unique to Mexico, Schulz-Cruz

claims, “in Mexico, the macho archetype can no longer be taken seriously. There, the transition has been in process since the 1970s, and even before that, when male chauvinism in the cinema was also already in retreat. The stability of some male patrons was being threatened and debilitated” (25). In the wake of this retreating chauvinism, the almost exclusively heteronormative on-screen representations of male figures began to allow for alternative kinds of masculinities.

In spite of negative reception on the part of many academics, film critics and activists, the Mexican *fichera* films are a starting point for exploring representations of non-heterosexual male characters. According to Schulz-Cruz, though the genre is epitomized by “laughable gay characters and an overabundance of stereotypes,” the *fichera* films are noteworthy because “they demonstrate the intention to liberate repressed sexuality by opening the doors to a new vision of the world” (15). Often, the plotline of these films mirrors that of the *cabaretera*, but offers the opportunity for the fallen woman to develop relationships with non-customer homosexual men. These figures, usually appearing as bartenders or security guards in the cabaret where she works, function as a kind of support system for the disgraced female. However, Schulz-Cruz claims that these men are “only part of the décor; they do not enter into the dialectical game of relationships or the exchange of fluids” (14), meaning their relationships are superficial and are not even granted the same level of intimacy as prostitutes. These men serve as tangible contrasting images to the archetypal “macho” figure from Golden Age films, despite being often portrayed as overly effeminate in dress, mannerisms and speech. In addition to the exaggerated representation of homosexual men, these *fichera* films also facilitated on-screen depictions of drag queens within this space of the cabaret. The presence of these drag queens exposes the existence of a Mexican population that challenges the gender binary. Unfortunately, though, despite their

subversive potential, these figures often fell into the trope of exaggerated qualities that bore little resemblance to real life homosexual men and drag queens.

In contrast to the flat constructions of homosexual characters in the *ficheras*, amidst growing consciousness of gay rights movements in Mexico, there are examples of films that broke the mold. Most film scholars concerned with cinematic masculinities agree that the two films that provided alternatives to the stereotypical depictions of on-screen homosexual masculinities are Arturo Ripstein's 1977 film, *El lugar sin límites*⁴² and Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's 1984 work, *Doña Herlinda y su hijo*. While groundbreaking works that depict homosexual men as more than just "décor" inside the cabaret sphere, more importantly, these films put "the homosexual body in the realm of legitimacy" (Schulz-Cruz 30). This realm of legitimacy means that these men are not only developed as characters, with emotions, desires and personalities, but they are able to connect on an interpersonal and sexual level with other men. Additionally, as Sergio de la Mora asserts, "Ripstein's *El lugar sin límites*" and the popular *fichera* movies of the 1970s and '80s moves beyond the positive-negative analysis of stereotypes, arguing that gay characters, imagined as queeny *jotos* (Mexican colloquialism for male homosexual) function as minstrel figures" (5). De la Mora is suggesting that in many ways, these on-screen homosexual and drag figures (with and without character development) are consciously created mechanisms for picking apart and making fun of the pervasive discourses of homosexuality in Mexico.

⁴² The film *El lugar sin límites* is an adaptation of the 1966 novel by José Donoso. The film parallels a literary moment in which gay figures were beginning to have more dynamic and developed characters such as in *El beso de la mujer araña* by Manuel Puig in 1977 and *El vampiro de la colonia roma* by Luis Zapata Quiroz in 1979. The rise in literary and cinematic representations would have formed part of Tito Vasconcelos' growing participation and consciousness about gay rights and social recognition. He even performed as part of the cast in a 1976 theatre production of *El lugar sin límites* (Moncada 317).

Danzón (1991)

Released in 1991, María Novaro's film, *Danzón (1991)*, has been most highly regarded by academics and film critics as a work that plays with both the melodramatic conventions of the Golden Age *cabaretera* model as well as the gendered gaze. As María Novaro states in an interview, "what we do is to work with this genre, make fun of the forms melodrama takes. In *Danzón*, we certainly were playing constantly with a melodramatic form" (Arredondo 201). More than making fun of melodramatic conventions of the *cabaretera* genre, Novaro brings those conventions of the past into contemporary Mexican culture, reminding spectators of the ways in which identities were imagined and solidified through cinema. This connection to the past is what Sergio González Rodríguez signals as an important facet of the film; "*Danzón* no es una película de época, pero retoma lo que los mexicanos llevamos dentro y que nos viene de muy atrás. Esta película juega muchísimo con la herencia del buen cine mexicano" (192). One of the most notable ways in which Novaro plays with the *cabaretera* melodrama is her inversion of the Golden Age expectation that women enter prostitution out of destitution. Rather, in her film, Novaro's female prostitutes are not portrayed as down on their luck and forced into selling themselves, but as women with agency who enjoy their sexuality. Additionally, these women are in a position of offering help to the female protagonist, rather than needing it themselves. More specifically, Julia looks to these prostitutes to assist her in her search for her missing dance partner, Carmelo. Despite looking to others for assistance in her quest, Julia's mobility reflects a sense of female independence in the film more broadly. As Norma Iglesias describes, the film "tells of a woman who contrasts two life experiences that are quite different: one is very traditional, mired in routine, and even prejudiced in Mexico City, and the other is a freer and more ludic existence in Veracruz" (182). As Iglesias signals, Julia's movements within the

public sphere, as a single mother who leaves the house to work as a telephone operator and social dance in the evenings is important because of the way it breaks with expectations of the accompanied, married woman. Furthermore, choosing to travel alone to Veracruz, and without the intention of becoming a prostitute, breaks with the model of quintessential “fallen women” Golden Age films such as *La mujer del Puerto* (1934) and *Santa* (1931).

As further evidence of updating the *cabaretera* genre, *Danzón* revises the traditional gendered gaze of the male onlooker and female object of desire. In large part, the shift in gendered gazing is due to the way in which the film “substitutes feminine figures and roles in place of their masculine counterparts” and in doing so, “documents, narrates, and represents the subjectivity and social reality experienced by women” (Iglesias 179). By emphasizing the lived reality of women, it follows that, as film scholar Sergio de la Mora states, “*Danzón* accommodates and promotes female desire and independence, representing changes in gender roles in a positive light” (60). Expressing this desire through the gaze allows the screen-story characters, and particularly Julia, to actively look upon the male body as an object of desire. Yet, not all male bodies are equal in their sexual desirability in the film, which “is made evident through the transvestite whose body is decorated and fetishized, through Rubén’s body which appears as the object of Julia’s desire, and through the non-sexual desire that Julia holds for the mysterious figure of Carmelo” (Iglesias 179). While the way Julia looks on at the virile young man in Veracruz and gazes upon the features of Carmelo’s face as they dance are worthwhile sites of analysis, it is her engagement with the transvestite male body that is central to this chapter. More specifically, that Julia looks on at Susy, the decorated transvestite body, serves to further dismantle and reorganize the gendered gaze of the past.

Susy: Visually and Musically Dragging the *cabaretera*

Much of the scholarship and critique written about the film, *Danzón*, has centered on the director's revision of the Golden Age model as well as the centrality of the female protagonist's sexualized gaze. Nonetheless, very little consideration has been given to how Julia's gazing upon a transvestite performer complicates the gender binary of male-female relations. More specifically, this analysis seeks to unpack how the element of cross-dressing functions as a way of not just playing with, but rather, of subverting and queering traditional cinematic conventions. As a result, the analysis that follows will acknowledge the importance of the female gaze, but also the manner in which Susy holds agency over the way in which she is seen. As Schultz-Cruz claims, "*Danzón* is a movie in which Suzy, the queer character, is presented on par with the protagonist. Suzy occupies a marginal space, just like Julia, but at the same time she is a character in control of her life, an empowered mistress of her own world" (155). This description of the character also echoes statements made by the actor, Tito Vasconcelos. Having been forced into the margins of official culture because of his sexuality, the actor has made a conscious decision to remain there because of the liberty he has to express himself artistically (Lida "Activist" 101). Part of his decision is motivated by the fact that "in Mexican cinema both gays and transvestites are usually portrayed as sexually obsessed, misogynistic, and contemptible" (Lida "Activist" 101), and as a result, generally refuses roles he is offered. However, his decision to take on the role of Susy affords him and his character the power to work within and against the predominantly negative stereotypes promoted via popular culture. While many scenes in the film provide ample material for exploring Vasconcelos and Susy's disidentification with mainstream narratives, the cabaret performance functions as a microcosmic example, ripe with elements of drag and queer musical subversion.

During Julia's search for her missing dance partner, Carmelo, she encounters and forges a friendship with Susy, a transvestite "artista." Attending one of Susy's cabaret performances, Julia finds herself in a cabaret reminiscent of those the great *rumberas* danced in. Specifically, the way the camera zooms out from a master shot of the back wall, painted with images of palm trees, sand and sun to focus on the central image of Susy visually reminds the film's viewers of Ninón Sevilla's performance of the song "Arrímate cariñito," in *Aventurera*.⁴³ But, unlike the full-frontal view of Sevilla's body, centrally posed between the palm trees on stage, Susy's face is the object the camera focuses on, slowly zooming out to reveal the entirety of her body. This fragmentation emphasizes Susy's "citation with a difference."⁴⁴ As the camera zooms out, though focused on Susy's body, it also reveals the spectators inhabiting the space. While the camera gaze at times reveals Julia's "point-of-view shots as she enjoys the show" (Tierney 366), she is the only female spectator present. Panning throughout the space, the camera exposes the remaining bodies present in this cabaret: men (as either spectators or servers). The importance of this is that through these visibly gendered cues, this is not an ordinary cabaret, but rather, a queer cabaret space. This is reinforced by the camera, as it cuts between Susy's performance and zooming shots, capturing the almost grotesque representations of female anatomy that adorn the cabaret walls. Emphasizing the enlarged plaster molds of torsos, breasts and legs, these female bodies are more disturbing than pleasing to the eye. According to Dolores Tierney, reinscribing the iconic image of the cabaret space and *rumbera* dancer in this way, "Novaro is not producing a camp parody of the *cabaretera* genre, but paying respectful homage. This is symptomatic of the manner in which *Danzón* updates the *cabaretera*" (369). At the same time, the act of

⁴³ Susy's background and appearance within the screen shot is likely a conscious re-construction of Ninón Sevilla's initial pose between palm trees planted on stage. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gjohLdZKv84>

⁴⁴ For video clip of *Danzón*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4luNaW6J88k>

watching Susy perform within this visibly non-heteronormative space not only destabilizes but also queers the traditional image of the Golden Age biologically female performers, like Sevilla.

Dawning the stage in a form-fitting white leotard complimented by bright red ruffles on her arms and down the long skirt that covers her backside, Susy's outfit drags the audience and film viewer's memory back to mid-twentieth century *rumbera* fashions. As de la Mora describes, "the sequence depicting Susy performing 'El coquero' in a *rumba* outfit celebrates the *rumbera* as a fabulous and fantastic figure, an icon of pleasure, an object of male desire and fantasy, one who seduces males and females alike, be they gay, straight, bisexual or otherwise" (65). Complete with perfectly styled hair, painted nails, jewelry, and heels, Susy's performance demonstrates how, "having learned the 'charms' of celluloid femininity from Mexican cinema's famous *rumberas*," she recreates her idols "through stylized and theatrical displays of the body" (de la Mora 61). Yet, this recreation of Golden Age glamour is not an exact replica, and as Elizabeth Freeman states, "to pause on a given image, to repeat an image over and over, or to double an existing film in a remake or reshot become productively queer ways to 'desocialize' that gaze and intervene on the historical condition of seeing itself" (*Time Binds* xviii). In this sense, *Danzón's* intervention in this popular cinematic genre and cabaret scene of the past allows Susy's presence to demarcate difference and possibilities for imagining queer spaces and times within contemporary Mexican culture. Part of this notably queer subversion of the idyllic *rumbera* body is the way Susy shows off her legs, though with a strategically placed bow in front of her tucked away male genitalia, overtly signaling the coquettish nature of her appearance as well as her cross dressing.

Unlike the famous dancers of the past, Susy's movement is rather static. Even though she does move her arms, step to the side or shake her hips a little, dancing is nowhere near as central

to Susy's performance as it was for the *rumberas*. It could be argued that Susy's movement is less pronounced because the music is different than in original *cabaretera* films; *rumba* and *danzón* are completely different compositional structures and dance forms. Rooted in partner dancing, *danzón* is known for maintaining a rigid frame between the male and female dancers. In Mexico, unlike the Cuban *danzón*, there is far less body movement as the dance was "sanitized" in order to be accepted into urban societies as a respectable and decent dance.⁴⁵ Moreover, at this point in the film, it is also worth noting that Susy has not yet been "taught" the details of dancing *danzón*. So, it is plausible to assume she does not know the correct steps. Yet, rather than assume the lack of movement is because "Susy" or Tito Vasconcelos do not know how to dance, I suggest this is a consciously subdued subversive act. By removing the dancing, what is left is the unabashedly confident cross dresser's *rumbera*-inspired body as the object of desire; the spectator's gaze undeniably desires this body for no other reason than for its beauty and femininity. It is in this way, as de la Mora notes, "the sequence's self-reflexivity denaturalizes the glamorous image of femininity constructed by the Mexican cinema" (65).

While the use of drag aesthetics signals one of the ways Susy embodies a kind of self-reflexivity, it also signals her existence as an outsider. Further emphasizing this sense of being on the margins, the scene's musical selection connects the performance to a history of Otherness within Mexico. As Tierney claims, in this "1990s version of the cabaretera, space is established for marginalized groups or ideologies both through the organization of narrative and through the specific use of song and dance" (364). As previously noted, Susy does very little dancing, and yet it is precisely her mimed sonic performance that connects her queer body to a broader scope of marginalized groups in Mexico's history. The first of these groups are the black Cuban bodies,

⁴⁵ For more information on stylistic differences and characteristics of both Mexican and Cuban *danzón* see Madrid 2013; Buffington 2005; Daniel 1995, pg. 69.

creators of *danzón* music and migrants into Mexico's land and sonicscapes. According to ethnomusicologist Alejandro Madrid, *danzón*'s popularity during the early twentieth century represents a level of acceptance towards these Other bodies, though not without limitations.

Following broader intellectual and political pressures, Madrid explains:

since [José] Vasconcelos's model emphasized only European and indigenous cultures, the erasure of blackness became a central component of mestizaje as well. In the case of music, the presence of musical forms like the *danzón* (increasingly associated with Cuba) allowed blackness to be projected onto Caribbean influences as if all blackness in Mexico were imported from Cuba (*Danzón* 98).

Moreover, post-Revolution urban classes claimed the *danzón* as part of the soundtrack to their experiences, coinciding with not just a growing acceptance of Cuban bodies, but also “a shift in the music's reputation and its identification with exoticism, urban experience, prostitution and blackness” (Madrid *Danzón* 94). In this sense, *danzón* functioned as an aural signifier of a specific black Otherness that was perceived as contained within the sphere of the urban dance hall and cabaret. As a result, the musical style became a sonic marker for this outsider racial group, but one that was accepted and enjoyed because of its predictability, and in many ways, because it was cleansed of any threatening possibilities to encroach upon more refined Mexican cultural productions.⁴⁶

Sonically connecting notions of blackness and urban experiences, *danzón* also quickly became associated with another marginalized group: fallen women. According to Madrid, *danzón*'s inclusion in cinema cemented its association with the story of the fallen woman.

⁴⁶ As Madrid and Chapter One's discussion on race make clear, blackness was often associated with an idea of primitiveness, which is also part of *danzón*'s history: “Racial formations associated with early *danzón* performance include the highly stratified colonial/postcolonial societies in Cuba and Mexico in which non-white individuals tended to occupy marginal positions, and in which dominant society perceived Afro-descendant cultural forms as primitive at best” (*Danzón* 12).

Beginning with the earliest examples of these kinds of plotlines, *Santa* (1931) and *La mujer del Puerto* (1934), Madrid explains that:

in both films, as in the case of later movie genres they helped develop – the *cabaretera*, *rumbera* and *fichera* films of the 1940s and 1950s – danzones and boleros provide the soundtrack to immorality and prostitution. The fact that these styles of music derive from the Caribbean made them the perfect repositories of ‘otherness’ (*Danzón* 109).

In its transference from a marginalized racial Other to a gendered Other, *danzón* again signals the containment of these bodies; these fallen woman housed within the space of the cabaret makes them and their musical accompaniment less threatening to Mexican female morality. Moreover, as Madrid explains, associating these non-normative sexual females with *danzón* was a conscious cultural decision; “using the *danzón*, a foreign, black music, to symbolize the shame that modern women would face by entering the public sphere proved less controversial than stigmatizing a local music with such associations” (*Danzón* 109). What Madrid signals is that “in opposition to local mariachi and ranchera music that came to represent a male chauvinist Mexican identity in the *comedia ranchera* genre” (*Danzón* 109), Mexican Golden Age Cinema selected this already Othered musical style to encompass another kind of other, rather than subject national sounds to associations with unacceptable actions.

Departing from these negative associations with the cabaret space and its *danzón* sound, Susy’s sonic connection to this musical style makes her visibly queer transformation and its subversive potential complete. Although, by *cabaretera* film standards, Susy’s performance should be accompanied by some kind of Cuban music, her use of *danzón* does more than just recreate cinematic images of the past; is a tool she uses to identify as part of an aural community of Others. Moreover, that she elects a *danzón*, while looking like a *rumbera* destabilizes the broader associations of physical appearance and sonic performance. Taking this discrepancy into

account further substantiates the way music functions in the film as a way to re-interpret and “help the critical mind look at the ‘old’ as a site of interesting exchange and cultural value, as a site of political resistance” (Tierney 366). Using this notion, Susy’s performance of “El coquero” is not just an act of political resistance to the exclusion of Othered racial or sexual bodies, but is an act of disidentifying with the past through musical means. Also performed by Sara Montiel in the film, *Por qué ya no me quieres* (1953) (Wood 288), Agustín Lara’s “El coquero” is not one of his most famous compositions, but reflects the importance of his musical contribution to *danzón*’s growth and popularity in cinema. Recognized as one of the leading composers during Mexico’s post-Revolutionary period, Lara created sounds that came to epitomize the new nation. As a result, Susy’s performance against the sonic backdrop of Lara, drags the composer into this present and queer moment. Not only does Susy insert Lara into the present, but by choosing a version of the song recorded in 1935 by Ana María Fernández⁴⁷ further emphasizes a chronological reorganization of Mexico’s musical history. Furthermore, Susy’s transmission queers the preexisting double meaning. As a song that plays with the words “coco” and “coquero,” the lyrics tell a story of a man, “el coquero,” who sells “cocos” to a girl.

In this sense, this drag queen body, lip-syncing to the past reveals a queering of just exactly who is selling and who is buying this thinly veiled allusion to heterosexual encounters. Moreover, Susy’s call to and interrogation of the past highlights Freeman’s assertion that “sexual dissidents become figures for and bearers of new corporeal sensations, including those of a certain counterpoint between now and then” (*Time Binds* 7) as her performance re-inscribes Lara’s tune and Fernández’s voice within this queer place and time. Additionally, electing not to sing, but to lip-sync, Susy’s performance epitomizes the characteristics of female impersonator

⁴⁷ From the album “La cancionera del estilo único.”

drag queens; completing her feminine look and charm with the vocal timbre of Fernández, Susy is the mouthpiece for Golden Age female cabaret icons. At the same time, Susy captures Ester Newton's observation that impersonation "provides a form for the performer to work within and against" conceptions of heteronormative expectations that come with performing widely recognized stars and icons (48).

Compounding the layers of disidentification with and challenges to broad notions of gender during the performance, Susy's post-performance deconstruction exposes the falsity of her drag façade. After the performance, Susy and Julia share a private moment in the backstage dressing room. When Julia enters, she finds herself no longer gazing upon a drag replica of the glamorous *rumbera*, but of a body in the process of disassembling the façade. Dressed in a black corset, but without her breastplate, and revealing her nearly shaven head, Susy immerses Julia in the artificiality of her constructed female persona. Furthermore, following Susy around the dressing room as she places her costume pieces in their places, looking in the mirror at her less painted face and zooming in on her body padding, the camera mirrors Julia's gaze as she absorbs the process of breaking down the illusion that was so carefully created. While, in part, the importance of this scene resides in its intimate reveal of how easily gender is manipulated, it is also a moment in which Susy unbinds herself from the past. As Freeman suggests in her work on queer temporality, "time binds" is a way to consider how "naked flesh is bound into socially meaningful embodiment" (*Time Binds* 3). During her performance, Susy's naked flesh was tucked and synched so as to bind itself into a dialogue with the past. Yet now, in the space of her dressing room, the performer unbinds herself of that embodiment only to be reminded of how she is bound to her current moment. More specifically, Susy's body is vulnerable to negative reactions to her transvestism within a nation that firmly perpetuates the male-female gender

binary. As Julia looks on, Susy's in-between male and femaleness emphasizes just how out of place her body is in a world that has no spectrum of gender, only complete transformations regardless of how much manipulation or exaggeration they require to be convincing.

Susy and Spectator's Oppositional Gaze

Despite being only a short segment, Susy's drag performance is a microcosmic example of the way the film more broadly breaks with traditional *cabaretera* norms and allows screen story characters a space to oppose traditional gendered gazing. For example, as Tierney describes of the cabaret scene, "the shots of Suzy singing, after an initial straight-on master shot, are established as Julia's point-of-view shots as she enjoys the show. In this way, María Novaro redirects the conventions of the *cabaretera* genre in *Danzón* to emphasize female desire and subjectivity as well as gay male culture" (366). More than just redirecting the gazing conventions, the protagonist's desire to look at Susy rejects and replaces Laura Mulvey's male centric camera gaze with a new ordering of the object and the objectified. Furthermore, that Julia wants to look upon a body in drag complicates any sense of a traditional gendered gaze; she desires to watch not a man's body in this moment, but its representation of hyper-femininity. The importance of these layers is the way they not only oppose the male-female gaze of the past, but also completely confuse and rearrange the possibilities of gaze directionality. Additionally, as the only female body in the audience, Julia's fellow all-male audience suggests that they too wish to look upon Susy's drag queen body. However, these male spectators and male cabaret employees presumably know that what lies beneath the dress, makeup and wig is a homosexual man's body. As such, their looking further queers a narrative of female objectification. It is then, through their accepting gaze towards the female-portrayed-by-male body that the scene cements its opposition to the past and positions the space of the cabaret as a site of alternative desiring looks.

Outside the screen story, the cabaret's rupturing of traditional female-male interactions of desire awakens spectators to the possibilities of rejecting standard binary representations of being in the film more broadly. Although she does not consider audience responses to the cabaret scene specifically, Norma Iglesias' work catalogues the way viewers ranging in age, gender and sexual preference reacted to the film. Having been nominated for several awards and winning the 1992 Premios Ace for Best Supporting Actor (Tito Vasconcelos) (Alzate 2010, 132), Best Supporting Actress (Carmen Salinas), Best Actress (María Rojo), Best Director (María Novaro), and Best Film,⁴⁸ *Danzón* had large base of enthusiastic viewers contributing to its success. As Iglesias reveals, the film found primary acceptance among female and homosexual male viewers, "the group composed of younger gay men spoke of the story of *Danzón* in a manner similar to that registered in women's groups. For the group of young gay men (DG8), the film is not only a romantic love story, but also it also exposes a particular way of being" (182). More specifically, Iglesias recorded heterosexual female responses as understanding the film's plot as corresponding to "the life of women' (DG2), but a life that not only represents Mexican women but humanity as a whole" (184). In this sense, this group of spectators accepted the screen story as one of female empowerment, but also as an example of considering different types of lifestyle practices. Expanding upon "a particular way of being," the film's break with traditional gender roles and expectations resonated with the group of marginalized homosexual male bodies; "for the group of young gays, the search for oneself, daring to take a position, and the establishing of and commitment to principles are key components when facing a society that constantly rejects and attacks homosexuality" (Iglesias 183). Not to exclude female homosexual spectators, "the young lesbian group defined the theme in two levels; first, in a non-symbolic way, as 'a woman

⁴⁸ For all award nominations see IMBD: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0101658/awards?ref=tt_awd.

who looks for a man with whom she knows she can dance' (DG3), only to later affirm that the theme revolves around life and dance" (Iglesias 184), suggesting that they enjoyed and accepted the storyline, but did not appreciate it as a conscious questioning of gender divisions.

In contrast to the groups that enjoyed and identified with the screen story, there are viewers that rejected the film's narrative of female agency, cross dressing and homosexual presence, essentially themselves becoming oppositional gazers. For example, according to Iglesias' study, heterosexual men were the primary group of viewers that did not identify with the film. She states, "for their part, the adult heterosexual males agree that *Danzón* does not speak to or develop a 'great theme, though it is well made' (DG7b)" (Iglesias 183), signaling that while they appreciated the quality of the film, they did not necessarily feel a connection to its message. Furthermore, for this group of audience member "the problem with the plot is not moral – though their reasoning is – but rather the problem lies in the narrative logic of the film; they define *Danzón* as a 'simple (Dg7a) film in which 'there are no problems' (DG6)" (Iglesias 182). While these comments are not outright articulations of opposition, they are indicative of the way heterosexual males did not seem to understand the way the film was itself a statement on the problem of gender in Mexican society. As audience members unable to identify with the film, finding it overwhelmingly simple in plot and lacking a central problem speaks to a broader mentality held by heterosexual Mexican men. Having been historically afforded socio-cultural privilege, their comments reveal a deeply entrenched ignorance, or perhaps avoidance, of the exclusionary gendered practices that continue to thrive within the nation.

Vasconcelos' Opposition and Disidentification through Susy

By discussing screen-story viewer responses to *Susy* and how non-screen story spectators reacted to the film more generally, it is important to consider how Vasconcelos was able to

channel his own experiences through Susy given the controlled nature of cinematic productions. As previously discussed, Vasconcelos is particular about taking on roles in cinema because of the risk in portraying homosexual figures in a negative way or as caricatures of real-life people. This stance reflects not only a professional commitment to presenting homosexual characters in a more positive light, but also his personal opposition to accepting their stereotypical screen-story depictions (Lida “Activist” 101). Because his convictions as a gay rights activist influence his artistic endeavors, such as his performance as Susy, a character with agency and personal development, can be appreciated as an act of disidentifying with projections of the past. Yet, given how many factors contribute to creating a film, it is worth asking some important questions: (1) Why did Vasconcelos get the role; (2) How much liberty did he have in his depiction of Susy? What makes these questions so difficult to answer, and yet important to consider, is in part how they speak to the consciousness behind Susy’s characterization. In addition, these questions are complicated by the fact that they are not topics explicitly discussed in interviews with the actor or director. Hence, what follows is mainly an informed conjecture based on reading into what Novaro and Vasconcelos do not say rather than what they do.

In one of her many interviews about the film, Novaro explains that she wanted to include transvestite figures because “los travestis me encantan” (Vega 28). Taking into account her attention to detail about the film’s re-working of the *cabaretera* genre, Novaro likely had a specific image in mind and yet, within this image, Vasconcelos was not her original choice for the role of Susy. As he revealed in an interview with David Lida of *The Village Voice*, the actor was not the director’s first choice; “he only filled in when the original actor – a drag queen Novaro had found ‘on the street – got cold feet and dropped out” (“Susy Who” 64). While Novaro doesn’t mention this incident in interviews, she does speak about the lack of actor

training available in Mexico (Arredondo 207). Reading between the lines, I suggest that though Novaro wanted a kind of “authentic” representation of transvetism, she realized that a more seasoned actor would be necessary for the role Susy. Considering her interest in cross-dressers and Vasconcelos’ popularity as a performer who utilized drag, I propose that Novaro was very likely acquainted with both his work and activism in Mexico City. Hence, in choosing Vasconcelos for the role, she was also likely to afford him some liberty in his interpretation in order to bring to life this socially aware character. Moreover, with Vasconcelos having produced satirical, subversive and politically charged theatre since the late 1970s, the actor himself would likely have turned down the role if he were not allowed some level of autonomy in constructing the character. So, what is the importance of my conjectures about Vasconcelos as Susy? Effectively, even with the scripted quality of working within film and Novaro’s pre-determined elements of the plot, Vasconcelos made his appearance an act of disidentifying with the past by means of bringing this transvestite character to life in all of her subversive potential.

Martita, Primera Dama (2001)

Unlike his role as Susy, when Tito Vasconcelos writes, produces and acts in his theatre productions, he is afforded greater flexibility and creativity in terms of content and his interpretations of characters. As a concrete example of this, the second work being considered in this chapter is his *teatro-cabaret* piece, *Martita, Primera Dama*. Examining this theatre work, in conjunction with his short drag appearance in *Danzón*, enhances an understanding of his ability to construct and manipulate gender representations. Moreover, comparing the two works reveals how, unconfined by cinematic conventions, Vasconcelos can push boundaries even further. This theatre production also functions as an example of his larger framework of satirical theatre style. As Alzate conveys in his exploration of Vasconcelos’ work, “este artista piensa que lo que él

hace es un teatro ‘ligero con contenido,’ entendiendo por ello el uso de un género que se basa en el humor mezclado con el acontecer cotidiano, pero que no pierde de vista un contenido poético profundo ligado a los temas gays y travestis”(Teatro 135). As a reflection of this “teatro ligero” within which Vasconcelos melds the serious topics of homosexuality with humorous delivery, he incorporates drag aesthetics, appearing as a completely transformed male-to-female and as an in-between construction. The importance of these different drag looks is the way in which they solidify the themes of gender and sexuality as filtered through the sonic, satirical and linguistic re-presentations of the nation’s First Lady and famous *ranchera* singer, Lucha Reyes. In other words, as a play about two famous female figures in Mexico, the use of drag makes a clear visual statement about Vasconcelos’ conscious efforts to queer and subvert heteronormative national expectations.

Aside from the interest in non-heteronormative content, *Martita, Primera Dama* also conveys the actor/dramaturge’s use of the sketches and political interests, typical of the *revista* and *carpa* traditions. Transmitted through a series of musical numbers, the first half of the work reveals timely social critique of the Fox sexenio and falsity of the nation’s leading couple. Presented in 2001 as part of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics Encuentro in Monterrey, Mexico, the piece reflects dissident views about the hypocrisy and neoliberal politics associated with 2000 Fox’s election. Referred to as “the opening of Mexico,”⁴⁹ breaking 70 years of PRI political dominance, *Martita, Primera Dama*, however, does not articulate so much a sense of hope as a notion of continuing the political farce under the new leadership of the PAN. As a way of connecting this current moment of disillusionment shared by many, Vasconcelos devotes the second half of the piece to performing primarily *rancheras* made famous by Lucha Reyes. As a figure often left out of musical history and associated with non-lady like qualities

⁴⁹ See Preston 2005.

such as depression and alcoholism, Vasconcelos drags her on stage to remind the public that queer and dissident bodies are not so easily erased. By singing primarily *ranchera* songs, Vasconcelos' style of *teatro-cabaret* is reminiscent of 1920s *revista* performances that "specialized in the canción ranchera" and "gained validation with the popularity of songs such as 'México Lindo,' and 'Del rancho a la capital,'" that became the basis for the popular film genre known as the *comedia ranchera* in the 1930s (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 67). Hence, Vasconcelos also links the second half of the performance to earlier historical moments of consolidating visions of what it meant to be Mexican.

Female Impersonation or Theatre?

Divided into two parts, the first half of the *teatro-cabaret* piece, *Martita, Primera Dama*, is a satirical representation of Mexico's former first Lady, Marta Sahagún. However, when the piece was presented, in 2001, Sahagún was in office and as a result, the piece captures Vasconcelos' continuation of the way *revista* productions critiqued contemporary political events and figures. In this case, the work scrutinizes Sahagún's personal life, relationship with Vicente Fox and calculated rise to power. Of primary interest for this analysis is Vasconcelos' use of drag aesthetics in combination with skilled acting techniques, which signal that Vasconcelos is not putting on a drag show, but rather, complicates the simplistic lip syncing model by incorporating drag as part of a theatrical performance. In this way, Vasconcelos combines the visual elements of typical drag shows with satirical commentaries of *teatro-cabaret* to blend the two worlds. Similar to his drag aesthetic in *Danzón*, Vasconcelos transform his male body into a near exact impersonation of female Sahagún. Having herself undergone a makeover and wearing "a smart suit" to emphasize "the extent to which she means business" (Mandel-Cambell, xxiv), Vasconcelos takes the stage wearing a suit, a wig with short hair, manicured nails and perfect

makeup, imitating the First Lady's notable look. His complete visual transformation into this particularly well-known figure captures how modern drag is "rooted in the culture of mass celebrity" and allows drag queens "to live out our deepening obsession" with these female icons (Harris 65). In this specific case, Sahagún was described by the *Los Angeles Times* as "possibly the most public, powerful and controversial first lady this nation has ever had" (Kraul A-11) because of the way she quickly transitioned not only from mistress to First Lady, but also how she went from housewife to playing an active role in Fox's government (Mandel-Campbell xxiv). Upon marrying on July 2, 2001, celebrating their love and the anniversary of Fox's election to office,⁵⁰ Sahagún found herself "at the centre of a national debate over the role of first lady" (Mandel-Cambell xxiv). In this sense, Vasconcelos' choice to re-present her on stage carries on the drag tradition of selecting women who capture the attention of a nation.

Even though Vasconcelos could "pass" as First Lady Sahagún, more than just a visible transformation takes place in this *teatro-cabaret* piece. In addition to looking like Sahagún, the actor mimics the First Lady's gestures as well as the way she speaks. As a result, Vasconcelos is not a drag queen per se, but rather, an actor who does "more than pretend" (Schechner 64) by blurring the lines between the two categories. An example of what Michael Kirby calls "complex acting," Vasconcelos completely transforms himself into the character he is playing by incorporating visual, sonic and movement cues (9; Schechner 147). However, his imitation/impersonation is one with a difference; the Marta Sahagún he re-presents on stage is a satirical construction of the real-life First Lady. Vasconcelos-as-First-Lady delivers a monologue about her relationship with Vicente, her ambition and desire for power, all topics that the actual Sahagún would not openly discuss. Recognizing the artifice behind the First Lady's image, this

⁵⁰ See "Discute Marta Sahagún con el Papa" 2001.

astute theatrical re-presentation reflects the actor's own personal disidentification with Sahagún's strategic creation of a public persona and the falsity of Mexico's political system more broadly. Moreover, this drag version of the nation's First Lady demonstrates how national symbols can be not only re-interpreted, but also re-contextualized and even re-constructed to fit different agendas. Although Butler would consider Vasconcelos' representation citational, and thus, lacking in subversive power, I believe it is precisely his choice of a well-known and powerful figures that is subversive.⁵¹ His imitation with a difference recreates Sahagún's image in a way that suggests the falsity of constructing gender, public personas and political values. By visually and sonically dragging his body, Vasconcelos' citation of the First Lady destabilizes the *status quo* of political exclusions based on gender or sexual preference that continue in contemporary Mexico. For that reason, this drag version of Sahagún is subversive by the mere fact that Vasconcelos, a gay man, assumes the role of and satirizes such a powerful political figure.

In "Her" Own Words: Marta's Story

Beyond imitating the look and movements of Sahagún, what makes Vasconcelos' queering of the First Lady even more convincing is his voice. As most female impersonations exist only in the visual realm, preferring to lip sync rather than attempting to vocally imitate their muse, Vasconcelos' vocal articulations bridge the gap between drag and theatre. As per Kirby's model, the voice is an added element for complex acting, solidifying the actor's total transformation into his character. Yet, I suggest there is something more happening in Vasconcelos' vocal simulation. As music critic Simon Frith suggests, the voice is not merely a component, but rather, is itself a character. He explains, "the voice, in short, may or may not be a

⁵¹ I am echoing an argument put forth by Prieto Stambaugh in which he suggests that Butler's dismissal of citationality overlooks the possibility of questioning "patriarchy constructed norms" by re-creating powerful figures through drag (89).

key to someone's identity, but it is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we're not, deceive people, lie" (197). As such, Vasconcelos' voice in this piece becomes a means to changing his identity to match his body's imitation of the First Lady. For example, described as having "the sort of soft voice that would soothe the most furrowed brow" (Mandel-Campbell xxiv), the actor aurally reproduces Sahagún's patterns of speech, intonation and even her slight lisp. Furthermore, he engages in topics of conversation that interest real-life Sahagún, such as her marriage, devotion to President Fox and religious conviction, though also satirizing these same topics. At stake in this vocal transformation is the way in which Vasconcelos' voice possesses the potential to convince or deceive listeners that they are in fact hearing the First Lady.

While presumably the audience is aware that they are watching a theatre piece, even those who might mistake the voice and visual imitation as the actual Sahagún are convinced otherwise by the humor imbedded in many comments. With statements like "yo soy la mujer más poderosa del país, but no hard feelings" and "lo más bonito de esta vida es ser esnob," there is little doubt that this on-stage version of Martita is different. Even when the First Lady has made bold public statements such as "I will definitely not limit myself to a traditional role," she framed herself as a willing assistant to the nation's leader; "I am taking on this project because I believe in my country and I believe in Vicente Fox, the president and a committed man" (Mandel Campbell, xxiv). In essence, the success of her public persona hinges upon avoiding any articulations about her own drive or feelings of entitlement, both topics Vasconcelos makes sure to emphasize. Poking fun at real-life Sahagún's reluctance to admit to any calculation on her part, this Martita explains to her audience the fortuitous way her and Vicente Fox met. This Martita recalls:

La gente me pregunta, ‘¿Martita, como conociste a Vicente?’ y yo les contesto, ‘un día estaba yo en la ventana de mi cocina, en Celaya, haciendo cajeta, cuando vi pasar por mi ventana una caja de coca cola móvil. Me asumé y debajo de la caja de coca cola móvil solo vi unas botas. Insistí y me asomé por la ventana y alcancé a ver un bigote. Y en este momento supe que ese hombre era mi hombre.’(Live Performance 2001).

The satire residing within this rendition is Sahagún’s lack of innocence in targeting Fox, one of the nation’s wealthiest businessmen. Further satirizing Sahagún’s outwardly constructed innocence, Vasconcelos-as-Martita insists that she did not really know if she would become First Lady or not. She says she had no way of knowing “porque primero me dijeron ‘dama’ y no entendí esto.” The crowd laughs at this joke because of the way it makes fun of Sahagún’s intelligence, while also exposing her not so secret personal ambition. In this sense, what the audience is responding to and finds humorous is Vasconcelos’ queering of the First Lady’s generally “diminutive” narrative about herself and her relation with President Fox (Mandel-Cambell xxiv).

Continuing the satirical commentary emitted through sonic cues, Vasconcelos utilizes music and song as a way to further destabilize the First Lady’s public image. In addition, the actor uses music as a way to dialogue with representations of female politicians in Latin America more broadly. Specifically, this musical revue considers the parallels between Marta Sahagún and another controversial female politician, Eva Perón. During her first year in office with President Fox, First Lady Sahagún was repeatedly compared to Eva Perón. While outwardly she may seem to have little in common with the Argentine leader, Sahagún is described as combining Evita’s “almost saintly aura and unquestioning devotion to her husband” and “is suspected of a thinly veiled ambition that far exceeds her station,” something Evita was also accused of (Mandel-Campbell, xxiv). Consequently, this *teatro-cabaret* piece integrates these parallels into the work. Organized like a series of musical sketches, in the spirit of the *revista*

tradition, *Martita, Primera Dama* is also reminiscent of the Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice musical, *Evita*; much like the Weber-Rice production, Vasconcelos primarily tells Sahagún's story through song. Furthermore, the titles of the two works reveal the conscious connection Vasconcelos sought to make via the similarity of the two women's names, transforming Marta into *Martita*, much like Eva becomes *Evita*. Engaging with the work of Jean Graham-Jones on performing *Evita*, she suggests that "from the beginning, *Evita* resists any consideration of the human Eva Perón, preferring to examine her public persona as a cautionary albeit captivating tale" (62). Similarly, *Martita* is a work that also explores the public persona of Mexico's First Lady, though perhaps more captivating than cautionary. Finally, similar to the Weber and Rice opera, there is "biting criticism," directed towards the leading lady: *Evita* it is filtered through revolutionary Ernesto "Che" Guevara, while in Vasconcelos' version, it is voiced through his queered presentation of the First Lady herself.

The musical selection for exploring and critiquing Marta Sahagún's persona is an array of popular songs not only queered by Vasconcelos's articulation of them in drag, but also by his lyrical manipulation. For example, the first song of the performance satirically explains that Sahagún had to change if she wanted to become First Lady; she had to convince Vicente to marry her. In the song she assures the audience of her successful conquest, to the tune of the musical *Evita*'s famous song: "Ya no lloren Mexicanos/ Vicente está conmigo," stressing her solidified position as First Lady. Not only does this song establish Vasconcelos' intentional parallels between Sahagún and Perón, it is also a reference to drag culture. As Graham-Jones explains, "'No llores por mi Argentina,' the rather liberally translated Spanish Version of *Evita*'s signature tune, 'Don't Cry for Me Argentina,' remains a standard of Latin American *chanteuses* and drag lipsynchers alike" (61). While it is not within the scope of this analysis to explore the

extent to which Vasconcelos' musical selection is emblematic of drag queen repertoires, the majority of his numbers are queered interpretations of famous pop artists and their hits, reflective of drag's predilection for contemporary cultural references. For example, in the song that follows "No lloren por mí," Vasconcelos invokes, but does not imitate, the star that both played Evita in the Argentine musical, *Eva*, and is known for her rendition of the Evita anthem: Nacha Guevara (Graham-Jones 62). By employing the works of pop artist Guevara, Vasconcelos situates his performance within the drag show norm of selecting popular songs and artists, but performs with the difference; actually singing live allows him the freedom to change and improvise lyrics. Singing Guevara's "Mi hombre,"⁵² Vasconcelos modifies lyrics that already satirize the seriousness of abusive relationships in a way that suggests the First Lady and President Fox have a less than perfect marriage. With lines like "ay que ver cómo me insulta, mi Vicente," this Sahagún depicts herself as the stereotypical Mexican woman who suffers physically and emotionally at the hands of her macho man. Additionally, Vasconcelos sneaks in lines like "qué me importa si trabaja fuera de la ley" to extend his critique beyond the marriage bed and into political affairs at Los Pinos, the Mexican White House. Yet, this is not the only Guevara song Vasconcelos uses to make fun of the Sahagún; he also sings a version of "Soy snob."⁵³ Even though the diminutive real-life Marta would never admit "Soy esnob/Es mi defensa mejor" or that "en la presidencia estoy encantada," Vasconcelos' version shows no shame in stating what the actor suggests as the truth (*Martita* Performance 2001).

In addition to performing modified versions of Guevara's work, Vasconcelos sings several songs without changing their lyrics. While this may not seem subversive, by performing as Sahagún it keeps these sonic experiences within a queer realm as their re-contextualization

⁵² For Guevara's performance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NPR1Hn4P2qQ>

⁵³ For Guevara's performance, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_d64kRnUII

imbues the songs with a new meaning specific to the performance of *Martita, Primera Dama*. For example, as part of explaining Sahagún and Fox's budding romance, Vasconcelos sings "I just want to be loved by you,"⁵⁴ made famous by Marilyn Monroe. Singing as Sahagún complicates the drag model of impersonation, as he doesn't seek to imitate this famous film vixen, but rather, uses the song to propose his own satirical commentary about the presidential couple. Without changing a single lyric, I suggest that Vasconcelos utilizes the song to present the First Lady as a woman armed with powers of seduction and charm, who much like Monroe, consciously used her feminine wiles to her advantage. Yet, in a biting critique of Sahagún's catholic beliefs, Vasconcelos sings Caetano Veloso's "Pecado,"⁵⁵ pointing to their less than holy affair. Though publicly a devout Catholic, and even holding a meeting with the Pope John Paul II to discuss her divorce and marriage to President Fox ("Discute"), this song choice insinuates that Sahagún is not the "holier than thou figure" she likes to present herself as. Moreover, this First Lady even tells her audience about her sex life with Fox filtered through the Elena Burke *bolero*, "Aburrida." Addressing her audience, Sahagún explains that she is constantly asked "¿Cómo es la vida sexual de Vicente?" to which she responds, "la misma pregunta que me hago yo" (*Martita* Performance 2001). Then, singing "hasta el mismo marido, aburrida," it is abundantly clear that Vasconcelos presents this once calculating seductress as more interested in political affairs than romance. In this sense, the re-contextualization of these songs queers their meaning, as they become critical and humorous commentaries on the First Lady's polished public persona.

Ladies and Gentlemen, a Version of Lucha Reyes

⁵⁴ For Monroe's performance in *Some Like it Hot*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WQIvhotZSUw>

⁵⁵ For Veloso's performance, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7wUOS7tiAc>

Going beyond incorporating song as part of the performance, the second half of the piece is entirely musical and concert-like. This emphasis on musical numbers, and more specifically, *ranchera* songs, links the performance to the *revistas* of the past as well as to the sonicscape of Mexico. While I will elaborate on the importance of the *ranchera* within Mexico's musical repertoire, it is worth noting that Vasconcelos does not perform just any *ranchera* songs. Rather, he devotes half of the performance to songs associated with the first female icon of this musical style, Lucha Reyes. Although he performs works by other artists, it is this connection to Reyes that is the focus of my analysis. By utilizing forms of drag, Vasconcelos brings Reyes to life; he brings her marginalized memory and queer history to the stage, transmitting her stories through song. Thus, as I will demonstrate, by binding himself to a figure already existing outside official narratives of *mexicanidad*, Vasconcelos' performance reveals a doubly queer act of subversion.

In contemporary Mexico, the *ranchera* is commonly associated with images of mariachi groups, Golden Age Films such as *Allá en el Rancho Grande* (1936) and emotive voices that sing of love and loss. However, these associations, developing over the last century, depart from the origins of the *canción ranchera*. Emerging from rural landscapes, “the evolution of the *canción mexicana* initially was synonymous with the *canción ranchera* because of who sang the songs; peasants, farmers, or rancheros” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 40). As these landscapes gave way to mass migration to urban settings, the *ranchera* too changed, and became a way to hold on to a more simple time. As Olga Nájera Ramírez explains, not only was the *canción ranchera* symbolic of Mexican rural culture, but it was also “considered an ideal expression of *lo mexicano* (Mexicanness) by romantic nationalists of the 1930s” (“Unruly” 185). Antonia García Orozco succinctly details how this ideal expression extends beyond the 1930s into the present as “*rancheras* are the epitome of Mexicanness, and the archetype of Mexicanness is the charro

glorified in the canción ranchera” (*Cucurrucucu* 40).⁵⁶ Though García Orozco does not expand upon how exactly the *charro* was glorified, Alejandro Madrid indicates the *ranchera*’s depiction of his “paternalistic masculinity such as chivalry, courage, virility, dependability, protection, and domineering control over women” inculcated popular culture (*Danzón* 105). Additionally, because the music “attained widespread popularity through radio and film, especially the *comedia ranchera* (Western comedy)” (Nájera Ramírez “Unruly” 186), the *ranchera*’s construction of masculine values became synonymous with being Mexican.

Because the *ranchera* was intimately linked to masculinity and *mexicanidad*, the emergence of female performers was particularly unsettling. To begin, male singers possessed a specific style, which, as Nájera Ramírez explains, meant singing “softly or tenderly in their performances” in order to be perceived as “‘romantic’ rather than feminine” (“Unruly” 199). Hence, “by participating as performers of the *ranchera*, women, by virtue of singing in their ‘female’ voice, recontextualize a text even when they do not change a single word” (Nájera Ramírez “Unruly” 196). The significance of this is two fold: 1) by entering a male dominated sphere, women threaten to dismantle the themes and images associated with the *ranchera*; and 2) the very sound of female vocals breaks down the rigid binary system that allows men to express emotions while women are to remain silent. Even without changing a single word or pronoun, by virtue of not just being heard, but being heard as emotional beings, female *ranchera* performers challenged gendered expectations. One voice in particular, that of Lucha Reyes, did more than just challenge these norms; Reyes shattered notions of what women were supposed to do, how they were supposed to sound, what they were supposed to talk about. According to Nájera Ramírez, “by incorporating a range of qualities culturally regarded as masculine, Reyes

⁵⁶ Also see Geijerstam 1976.

challenged the sexist division of emotions, making it possible for women to access both male and female qualities. In doing so, she also challenged the idea that women were confined to being “sweet, proper, and innocent” (199). The way Reyes “prodigaba su voz hasta desgarrarla, gemía, lloraba, reía e imprecaba” (Moreno Rivas 190) created a more fluid spectrum of human emotions in place of the rigid division between men and women.

The significance of Reyes’ popularity as a *ranchera* performer resides in her marginality, socially, economically and sexually. In spite of the many gaps in Reyes’ history, what is known about her early life is that she was born the daughter of a *soldadera*. As a figure marginalized within the records of the Revolution, given multiple definitions such as female soldier, or female support stage, or prostitute,⁵⁷ being born to one of these women already situated Reyes on the outside of acceptable female behaviors. Repeating a sense of outsider status, when she and her mother arrived to Mexico City, they settled in Tepito, “one of the poorest and roughest neighborhoods in Mexico City” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 110). Singing for money in the Mexico City *carpas* from an early age, Lucha Reyes quickly became “the first and undisputed queen of the canción ranchera” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 124). However, her fame came at a price: exposure and criticism of personal life, and more specifically, her sexuality. Though married several times, Reyes was never able to have children, which, as García Orozco contends, “kept her from being able to meet the requirement of the quality of motherhood; one of the most important tenants of the Culture of Modernity” (*Cucurrucucu* 117). More importantly for this analysis, Reyes’ inability to bear children posits her body as queer within the gendered expectations of femininity in Mexico. Yet, rather than shy away from her physical limitations as a woman, Reyes’ actively asserted her difference via sexual means. Specifically, it is well

⁵⁷ See Poniatowska, Elena. *Las soldaderas: Women of the Mexican Revolution*. El Paso: Cinco Puntos Press, 2006.

documented that “Reyes did not conform to the gender stereotypes of a heterosexual woman, a martyred Mexican mother, or passive china poblana. Reyes was actively lesbian and/or bisexual and had several serial monogamous relationships with women in addition to her known marriages” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 139).

Channeling these experiences of marginality through her voice, Reyes developed what scholars refer to as the *estilo bravío*, queering the sonic space of the male-dominated *ranchera*. The term, *estilo bravío*, is a reference to Reyes’ unabashed emotional expression as well as pays homage to the memory of the strong *soldadera*. As such, the *estilo bravío* expresses how Reyes’ form of singing used “the negative connotations associated with the female appropriation of privilege” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 62) to her benefit. In practical terms, for Reyes, appropriating privilege meant, “changing the pronouns in the lyric and changing the intent of the lyric thus creating alternate interpretations of the song. It involves questioning or mocking male privilege, challenging sexual norms and interweaving personal narratives with performances” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 105). Unfortunately rejected by Mexico’s upper class and elites, Reyes’ singing style became popular amongst many Mexicans precisely because she forefronted her grievances with aspects of Mexican social life and divulged her personal shortcomings for everyone to hear.

Armed with a voice that subverted expectations of not just the *ranchera*, but of female behaviors more broadly, Reyes’ visual performance continued to unsettle expectations. In general terms, the classic female *ranchera* singer “wore cotton or linen dresses that mimicked the indigenous attire of specific regions in Mexico or of the stereotypical ‘china poblana.’” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 66). As the *ranchera* grew in popularity, the costuming evolved and provided the female singer with two options: “either she exaggerates her femininity by

wearing some version of the Adelita outfit – a long, lacy, and often, in this performance context, low-cut dress – or she wears a female version of the charro outfit, where long skirts (and, more recently, sometimes a short skirt or short shorts) substitute for pants” (Nájera Ramírez, “Unruly” 200). What these descriptions indicate, in part, is the way in which *ranchera* costuming emphasized the rigid separation between male and female forms of dress. Secondly, they elucidate how the *ranchera* singer’s look functioned as another method of reinforcing idealized images of *mexicanidad*. Visually engraining the Adelita, the “china poblana” and the *charro* into the memories of those who watched live performances is of prime importance. Coinciding with Mexican official policy and cultural endeavors of the 1930s to fashion national images, “Reyes alternated wearing more Mexican symbols on her stage costumes such as the Mexican eagle or cacti; images associated with the Mexican flag and whose use some critics decried as derogatory of Mexican nationalism” (García Orozco, *Cucurrucucu* 126). Adorning herself, a body aligned with non-heteronormative sexual practices and vocal expressions, with altered images of national identity is a powerful message and critique of what exactly being or representing *mexicanidad* meant. Moreover, by incorporating these national images as part of her costume, she subversively revised their meaning to be inclusive of marginalized or queer bodies, such as her own.

Continuing Lucha Reyes’ struggle to find acceptance in a society constructed by rigid notions of heterosexuality and binary systems of gender, Tito Vasconcelos’ musical performance drags her struggles back onto the Mexican stage. Unlike the first half of this *teatro-cabaret* piece, Vasconcelos performs in a kind of drag that combines masculine and female images. Vasconcelos appears on stage wearing a dress with a tight corset-like design attached to a kind of hoop skirt that reaches thigh length and high heels and although he does wear rings, earrings and

displays feminine makeup (meaning lipstick, eye shadow, mascara and blush), he is not wearing a wig or body padding. Rather, his exposed head with very blond short hair, flat chest and muscular legs function to remind the audience that the entire appearance is a construction, which in this case is one that captures continuity between male and female gender markers. According to Nájera Ramirez, female *ranchera* singers use their costumes to “manipulate a range of images that expand the dualistic category of male/female to recuperate sexuality, agency, and independence as qualities available to women, not just men” (“Unruly” 200), which could also function as an apt description of what Vasconcelos does with this outfit. Yet, to consider Vasconcelos’ appearance within the world of drag, he “break(s) with the illusion of femininity,” which as Esther Newton claims, “is the mark of an experienced impersonator” (101). I contend, though, that Vasconcelos’ conscious in-between image has as much to do with his experience with drag performances as it does with his intention to subvert the gender binary. As Newton explains:

to mix sex-role referents *within* the visible sartorial system. This generally involves some ‘outside’ item from the feminine sartorial system such as earrings, lipstick, high-heeled shoes, a necklace, etc. worn *with* masculine clothing. This kind of opposition is used very frequently in informal camping by homosexuals. The feminine item stands out so glaringly by incongruity that it ‘undermines’ the masculine system (101).

In contrast to Newton’s description, the incongruities in Vasconcelos’ appearance are not acts of “informal camping,” but well-conceived acts of subversion intended to undermine the system. While, Vasconcelos wears female clothing, the masculine components of his physique are what destabilize “passing” as one gender or another. It is also his own awareness of these male parts, as I will discuss, that remind the audience that the entire visual package is a critique of gendered identity divisions.

More than just demonstrating his ability to use drag aesthetics to signal the permeability of gender boundaries, Vasconcelos' look is a way to drag Lucha Reyes into the present. Unlike his complete transformation into Marta Sahagún, the actor looks nothing like Reyes, and yet, his in-between drag look embodies the challenge Reyes posed to notions of masculinity and *mexicanidad* more broadly. Much like Reyes' outfits, Vasconcelos' dress too bears national images: two maguey plants at the top of the dress, an eagle eating a serpent sitting on a cactus in the middle of the dress, and cacti plants scattered across the fabric of the skirt. By emblazoning his body with these quintessential Mexican images, like Reyes did, he recontextualizes them and includes himself as part of that visual landscape of Mexico. For example, the maguey plants are strategically placed to resemble hands over Vasconcelos' non-existent breasts, distancing them from any association with nationhood or native fauna and more with notions of sexuality and female body parts. In addition, the emblematic eagle/serpent/cactus normally located in the center of the Mexican flag is positioned over Vasconcelos' stomach, as if transforming his body into a kind of flag. Furthermore, he addresses his audience directly, asking, “¿Qué tienen? ¿Qué no se puede desarrollar o progresar el vestido del folklore mexicano o qué?” (*Martita* Performance 2001). Given his approach to modifying the traditional folkloric outfit, the crowd responds with laughter. However, Vasconcelos' question and appearance are not simply funny, they are reproachful of the way queer bodies have remained excluded from articulations of *mexicanidad* and the lack of progressive thinking in the nation.

In addition to not looking like Lucha Reyes, Vasconcelos' live singing does not sound like her either. To begin, Vasconcelos does not attempt to manipulate his vocal timbre to emulate the soprano vocal range that Reyes possessed nor does he try to replicate her emotive cries, screams, laughs or howls. Yet, the songs Vasconcelos chose to perform are some of her most

well known and rich in emotion: “La tequilera,” “La mensa,” “Pobre changuita” and “Por un amor.” For example, as she sings “La mensa,” Reyes’ voice sounds as if she suffers from the hiccups, not fully finishing sounds, causing her voice to sound almost cartoonish, while in “Por un amor,” Reyes’ voice emits a strong sensation of not just sadness, but of profound agony and anguish. While Vasconcelos does convey emotion through his vocal performance, sometimes laughing or sounding like he could burst into tears, it is far from the range of emotions Reyes demonstrated. Rather than emphasize Vasconcelos’ vocal shortcomings, I suggest that he does not even try to mimic Reyes’ renditions because, as voice scholar Mdalen Dolar suggests, there is something so unique about a person’s voice that it can’t be exactly replicated. Dolar claims, “another way to be aware of the voice is through its individuality. We can almost unfailingly identify a person by the voice, the particular individual timbre, resonance, pitch, cadence, melody, the peculiar way of pronouncing certain sounds. The voice is like a fingerprint” (22). Therefore, rather than attempt to imitate the inimitable, through the mere act of singing her songs, Vasconcelos brings Reyes’ to the stage.

Perhaps more significant than how much Vasconcelos sounds like Reyes or not is how the selection of songs carries on her memory of queering the male-dominated *ranchera*. Specifically, “La tequilera,” is written from the female perspective and although “La mensa” is as well, the lover in the song is only addressed as “tú,” leaving the interpretation of gender and sexuality open. As another example of ambiguity, the song “Por un amor,” is gender neutral, which “could reflect a heterosexual, lesbian, bisexual, or gay point of view” (García Orozco, “Lucha Reyes” 155). Lastly, “Pobre changuita,” is a song about a woman’s “bravata y proeza sexual” (García Orozco, “Lucha Reyes” 146), capturing Reyes’ ability to challenge acceptable topics and female behaviors. Considered together, the themes of public drinking, sexual prowess,

and use of female pronouns were particularly subversive acts during Reyes' lifetime. Moreover, they can be read as acts of disidentification, rejecting the mainstream *ranchera* performance that isolated female bodies. By maintaining the use of female pronouns in this contemporary performance, what makes Vasconcelos' use of the female perspective so compelling is the way his homosexual and visibly in-between gendered body queers an already queer effort. By doing so, he is not only keeping with Reyes' act of subversion and disidentification, but is doubly queering Reyes' work. In this act of queering an already queer sound, Vasconcelos' performance is a way of making these subversive *ranchera*'s of the past inclusive of all types of marginalized bodies in the present.

Aside from maintaining the female pronouns, Vasconcelos utilizes improvisation, much like Reyes and earlier *revista* and *carpa* productions did, as a way to play with the audience's expectations of gender and sexuality. As García Orozco explains, "during live performances, Reyes added or took away lyrics changing the pronouns as it suited her. She also improvised dramatics to highlight the lyrics of the song and/or to create an alternative subtext of the lyrics" (*Cucurrucucu* 111). Similarly, Vasconcelos improvises during the songs as well as in between them to complicate the meaning of the songs and engage the audience. For example, after the first song, "La tequilera," he tells the audience a story from Reyes' perspective about a friend who wanted to perform, attempting to convince them that it is Reyes who is on stage and not Vasconcelos. He even jokes that he should get on with the show because "la gente está ansiosa de escuchar mi voz vernacular," as if the audience were waiting to hear Reyes sing. During his rendition of "La mensa," a humorous song about a girl who gets tired of being made a fool by her lover, Vasconcelos complicates the gendered panorama by suggesting he is going to put a personal ad in *El Universal*: "muchachas, 100% varonil, jovencita, jovencita, absténganse gordas

y las del disco” (*Martita Performance* 2001). What makes this lyrical interjection humorous for the audience is the way it confuses who is speaking: Vasconcelos, though he is an openly gay man? Reyes, a known bi-sexual often criticized for being masculine? Or some other interlocutor? Returning to the female perspective, he resumes Reyes’ perspective, telling the audience “yo preparé, sí, unas canciones vernáculas para la gente que venía de extraña, para que vean que aquí también se cuentan hadas, que las canciones son bonitas, que hablan de amor, que hablan de muchísimas cosas hasta de carácter social” (*Martita Performance* 2001). This element of social awareness is followed up with a direct call to the women of the audience to sing along to “Por un amor,” as if Mexican women are intimately familiar with the act of suffering for love. By isolating the women of the audience, Vasconcelos transforms this gender-neutral song into one sung by a woman. At stake in these moments of improvisation is precisely how they impact the meaning of the songs and complicate a simple binary of gender and sexual identities.

The element of improvisation present during both Marta Sahagún’s stage presence and Lucha Reyes performance is also a way for Vasconcelos to connect with his audience. As a part of the Hemispheric Institute for Performance and Politics Encuentro, Vasconcelos openly jokes about what these words even mean. For example, on the topic of performance and politics, as Sahagún, he tells the audience, “cuando dije perfumance y política, dije pues sí es que va bien con la política, que cada político perfume de una manera diferente. Yo, por ejemplo, soy clásica. Chanel número 5” (*Martita Performance* 2001). As the audience laughs at Sahagún’s mis-interpretation of the words performance and perfumance, Vasconcelos continues to make fun of the Encuentro and its participants themselves. Addressing the audience, Sahagún says “Estoy convencida de que a nadie le importa lo que hacen aquí, pero estoy aquí” (*Martita Performance* 2001). Later in the show, as Reyes, he again jokes with the audience about the themes of the

Encuentro, tying them to the song “Pobre changuita.” Addressing the audience, Vasconcelos-as-Lucha says, “epistemológicamente hablando de la letra de la canción que acabamos de escuchar...o sea...” and in response to laughter, says” o sea, no entendieron una chingada. Estoy viendo” (*Martita Performance 2001*). Though never seen throughout the recording of the performance, by attending the Encuentro, the audience is likely comprised of individuals who already possess a critical engagement with political, social and sexual dissidence. Hence, the importance of these moments of improvisation that provoke audience laughter and clapping is the way this audience of different ages, backgrounds and races find humor in Vasconcelos’ theatre. Furthermore, the spectators’ positive reaction to Vasconcelos’ jokes suggests an acceptance of his performance as a queer acts of subversion.

Conclusion

Both on-screen and on-stage, Tito Vasconcelos’ works are compelling destabilizing efforts to question gender, time, and, in a broad sense, what it would mean to expand the parameters of *mexicanidad*. Existing on the margins of popular culture, both by choice and by force, Vasconcelos has developed a performative style that utilizes drag and musical interpretations as embodied strategies to not only resist, but also subvert predominant narratives of belonging within the nation. More specifically, by dragging the cinematic icon of the *rumbera*, the nation’s First Lady, and the queen of the *ranchera* onto the cabaret stage, Vasconcelos demystifies the way in which genders are constructed as well as the dominant narratives of acceptable heteronormative ways of being. By doing so, Vasconcelos inserts himself, a queer body, into the nation’s past, by means of re-presenting the *cabaretera* genre of the Golden Age of Cinema and by telling Lucha Reyes’ history of nonconformative actions. In addition, Vasconcelos also makes his presence felt in the present by questioning and satirizing

the public persona of Marta Sahagún. In each of these female personas that Vasconcelos drags onto his body, he ultimately queers their memory, demonstrating both the fictions upon which notions of heteronormative Mexican life are built, and the subversive qualities of drag performance. Furthermore, through his citational performances with a difference, Vasconcelos demonstrates the possibilities to make a queer place and a time within which other non-heteronormative Mexican bodies can express themselves.

Chapter 3:

Las Reinas Chulas' Revision of Mexico's Golden Age: Queer Orientations and Representations in *Nosotras las proles*

I was first introduced to Las Reinas Chulas in 2012 when a friend suggested I see a performance at the Coyoacán theatre, *El Vicio*. I attended “Mujeres en el baño” and although one of Las Reinas Chulas was involved in directing and producing the piece, it was not a Las Reinas Chulas production. My friend suggested I go because Elena Poniatowska was going to be among the audience members; she was being honored in celebration of her 80th birthday. During her birthday week, Poniatowska attended and was recognized at several events around Mexico City, including at the renowned site of “official” cultural performances, Bellas Artes. So, her presence at *El Vicio* made me think that this space was perhaps much more important than I knew.

Unfortunately, that 2012 trip to Mexico City did not coincide with any of the Las Reinas Chulas' performances, but it planted the seed for future research. Upon returning to the United States, I realized that not only was *El Vicio* formerly known as *El Hábito*, the *teatro-bar* run by Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe, but also that Las Reinas Chulas had many videos, full-length and clips, on Facebook and YouTube that showcased their style.

The four female performers of Las Reinas Chulas are Ana Francis Mor, Cecilia Sotres, Marisol Gasé and Nora Huerta,⁵⁸ and in typical *teatro-cabaret* tradition they use artistic practices such as music, dance, costume and performance space to critically examine Mexico's social, political and cultural conditions. One such example is the piece, *Nosotras las proles*. Attending the 2013 International Cabaret Festival, this performance was my first opportunity to experience a Las Reinas Chulas production live. Having been performed since 2008, this August 2013

⁵⁸ For more information about Las Reinas Chulas, see http://www.lasreinaschulas.com/rch/01quienes_rch.htm

performance of *Nosotras las proles* in downtown Coyoacán, however, is the basis for my analysis. While a comparison of the different performances and evolution of this piece would be an interesting endeavor, it is not within the scope of this current investigation. Rather, the layers of complexity that characterize *Nosotras las proles* drive this analysis. Afforded access to the unpublished script by Las Reinas Chulas has enriched and complicated my initial understanding of the piece. For example, even as a non-Mexican, the visual and sonic references to the box-office hit, *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) were abundantly clear and though there were interjections, like that of the mariachi male trio or the indigenous male paired with the white woman, I assumed they were generalized references to cinematic archetypes. It was not until I read the script, however, that I realized the piece was far more intricate, combining references to five Golden Age Cinema classics: *Los tres García* (1947), *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), *Ustedes los ricos*, (1948), *Angelitos negros* (1948) and *Tizoc* (1957).

The script also elucidates the awareness Las Reinas Chulas have about current socio-political issues. Performed since 2008, the piece points to the way in which “las obras nacen y se modifican según lo que vaya pasando al nivel político” (Alzate, “Fiesten” 76), and specifically captures how the women of Las Reinas Chulas modify content in order to engage with contemporary events. For example, the title, *Nosotras las proles*, is more than just a play on *Nosotros los pobres*; it is a reference to the way the daughter of Mexican President, Enrique Peña Nieto, called his critics “proles,” insulting them as poor and uneducated.⁵⁹ Moreover, Las Reinas Chulas rewrote the 2013 script to include major events such as Peña Nieto’s proposed “energy reform” that would have privatized part of Mexico’s petroleum production;⁶⁰ the teacher’s union

⁵⁹ See Vargas 2011; Orozco 2011; “Hija de Peña Nieto,” 2011.

⁶⁰ See Olson 2013; “Peña Nieto busca,” 2013.

leader, Elba Esther Gordillo, was arrested on fraud charges;⁶¹ PEMEX leader Romero Deschamps was reelected;⁶² and teacher strikes took over city centers all over the nation.⁶³ It is important to note that this 2013 performance was outdoors, so at times during the live performance I had difficulty understanding the references. Yet, the vast majority of the audience, being Mexican, seemed to laugh or clap, acknowledging that they understood the references to the events that shaped their daily lives.

When I asked Ana Francis Mor about the process of re-creating *Nosotros los pobres* for *Nosotras las proles*, her response was straightforward and provocative, prompting the questions that have guided this chapter. I want to quote her at length because her words resonate with my previous discussions of the way Mexico's Golden Age of Cinema shaped the nation as well as point to the continued accessibility and proliferation of the films produced so many decades ago:

ese espectáculo, por ejemplo, de *Nosotras las proles*, tiene que ver con una fascinación por ese cine. Lo vimos tantas y tantas veces, todas esas películas las pasaban en un canal de televisión, el canal 4, todos los sábados. Entonces si tu ves que todos los sábados hay una película de esas o dos y entonces, bueno, fue parte de nuestra niñez, nuestra adolescencia durante años así... la misma película la viste 15 veces y entonces claro la sabemos de memoria y forman parte del pensamiento nacional y de la idiosincrasia nacional. (Interview 2013)

While I will continue to distill the theme of cinema as shaping *mexicanidad* throughout this chapter, I first want to explore the ramifications of re-playing these films for later generations. Specifically, I suggest that the lasting popularity of Golden Age films and the recognizability of audio-visual references have much to do with access to them via television programming and videos. It is not my intention to offer a historical study on the decreasing existence of movie houses in relation to increasing television sales, but as Néstor García Canclini

⁶¹ See “Detienen a Elba Esther Gordillo” 2013; “Encarcelan a poderosa líder” 2013.

⁶² See Montalvo 2012; Pérez Albarrán 2012.

⁶³ See Torres 2013; Padilla Fajardo 2013.

explains in his work *Consumers and Citizens*, this shift was indispensable for the longevity of Golden Age films. García Canclini states, “the dissemination of TV channels and video clubs throughout the country, with homogeneous programming designed by monopolies, makes it possible for viewers in large and small cities to have access to almost the same cinematographic repertoire” (113). The importance of this is precisely what Mor describes in her above comment; these movies continue to inform the present generations on what it means to be Mexican. Additionally, the role of conglomerates like Televisa and TV Azteca (the monopolies to which García Canclini is referring) make it possible for the entire country to share a particular vision of the past as well as the idiosyncrasies that shape the present.

More than just the way television has allowed Ana Francis, the other *Reinas Chulas* and an entire nation to memorize Golden Age films, the broader implication of this is the way these cinematic productions become objects. My intention is to consider these cinema classics as objects engrained in popular memory and reified through replay. My goal in this approach is to expand my queer considerations of cabaret and cinema. Specifically, I suggest the films of the past constitute objects in order to dialogue with Sara Ahmed’s work on queer phenomenology. In it, as I will later elaborate, Ahmed proposes that a path is created towards objects, one that is often heteronormative, and by diverging from this established path, the result is a queer orientation. For my purposes, the Golden Age films and their melodramatic qualities can be considered as objects that are re-orientated, subverted and queered in *Nosotras las proles*.

Las Reinas Chulas: An Introduction

As theatre performers, Las Reinas Chulas formally studied theatre at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) as well as with many of *teatro-cabaret* practitioners recognized for reviving the *revista*, *carpa* and cabaret traditions of the past. The most notable

cabareter@s and mentors of Las Reinas Chulas include: Tito Vasconcelos, Jesusa Rodríguez, Liliana Felipe and Astrid Hadad.⁶⁴ As a result of their formal, University-based education, and training with these “cuerpos disidentes” (Blanco Cano), Las Reinas Chulas’ work reflects and in-depth knowledge of the technical elements of theatre productions as well as the connectivity between *teatro-cabaret*, the audience and broader socio-political awareness. According to Gastón Alzate, “para las Reinas Chulas, el cabaret significa fundamentalmente desobediencia civil y resistencia, señalando así la estrecha conexión entre su obra y el activismo social” (“Dramaturgia” 57). By combining their theatre knowledge with awareness of contemporary events, Las Reinas Chulas produce humorous and critical pieces like *Nosotras las proles*.

The kinds of productions Ana Francis, Marisol, Nora and Cecilia present do not happen in a vacuum. Having worked with the aforementioned notable *cabareter@s*, Las Reinas Chulas also physically took their place in the theatre. In 2005, the women assumed control of *El Hábito*, once run by Rodríguez and Felipe. Renaming the space *El Vicio*, Las Reinas Chulas have kept the cabaret tradition alive for the last decade by regularly perform and inviting other local *teatro-cabaret* artists to entertain audiences. Moreover, melding Hadad’s international recognition as representing Mexican culture, Rodríguez and Felipe’s political support of liberal politicians such as Manuel López Obrador and Vasconcelos work in defense of LGBT rights (Alzate, “Dramaturgia” 62), Las Reinas Chulas’ work also extends beyond the confines of the theatre space and Mexico’s national borders as they produce a television series, offer workshops on gender inequality and violence in Central America, teach classes on how to become a *teatro-cabaret* performer and organize the annual International Cabaret Festival in Mexico City. To accomplish all of this, the women work tirelessly, but have also operated since 2005 as an

⁶⁴ Gastón Alzate details, “como grupo Las Reinas Chulas existen desde el año 2000 aunque su trayectoria comenzó desde antes cuando trabajan con Tito Vasconcelos... Luego se unieron a Jesusa Rodríguez y Liliana Felipe en el Teatro Bar El Hábito del 2002 al 2005” (“Fiesten” 74).

Asociación Civil. As Teatro Cabaret Reinas Chulas A.C., they utilize *teatro-cabaret* “para plasmar la realidad nacional de manera sencilla y lúdica, para así lograr que el público pudiera mirar lo sucedido desde una perspectiva crítica y, a su vez, pudiera accionar”

(<http://lasreinaschulasac.org/historia/>). Carrying out such important social and cultural projects has not gone unnoticed;

Las Reinas Chulas han sido becarias del Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA) en el programa Intérpretes de Cabaret. Asimismo, sus proyectos han sido apoyados por el Fondo de Ayudas para las Artes Escénicas Iberoamericanas del programa IBERESCENA y el programa Rutas Escénicas del FONCA con el cual realizarán una gira a Europa en el 2014.⁶⁵
(Lasreinaschulas.com/nosotras)

In addition to their European tour and financial awards, Nora Huerta was honored with a 2015 Ariel (the equivalent to an Oscar) in the category of *Mejor Revelación Femenina*,⁶⁶ signaling the way in which the women of Las Reinas Chulas are making an impact both in and outside the world of cabaret.

Part of what inspires the work and facilitates the success of Las Reinas Chulas is their positioning, physical and social, on the margins of Mexican society. As lesbians, Las Reinas Chulas’ sexuality tends to eliminate them from the heteronormative world, and even perhaps from that of homosexual men. As theatre performers, the women create works outside of popular cultural endeavors and by performing in their Coyoacán space, they are physically on the outskirts of Mexico City. Yet, much like their mentor, Vasconcelos, the women exist both within “mainstream” cultural productions and outside of it. According to José Esteban Muñoz, through performance, bodies produce works of disidentification, works that dismantle and challenge socially pervasive beliefs, such as those promulgated by Golden Age Cinema. Yet, at the same time, Muñoz proposes that these acts of disidentification are “a survival strategy that works

⁶⁵ <http://lasreinaschulas.com/las-reinas-chulas-de-gira-por-europa/>

⁶⁶ <http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/espectaculos/2015/lista-ganadores-ariel-2015-1103204.html>

within and outside of the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (5). For the women of Las Reinas Chulas, as homosexual bodies, activists and political liberals, their survival is appreciated via their relationship with the dominant sphere and outside of it. By forging relationships with the press, university departments, and, like Nora Huerta, appearing in television and film, the four women have a strong presence outside the world of *teatro-cabaret*. Hence, within this balancing act of being both inside and outside of dominant culture, Las Reinas Chulas, and works like *Nosotras las proles*, are able to disidentify with the current reality and propose new models of pertaining to the society in which they live.

Las Reinas Chulas’ Turn to *carpa* and *revista*

As practitioners of contemporary *teatro-cabaret*, the women of Las Reinas Chulas look to characteristics of past theatre forms to inform their current performance style. Much like Tito Vasconcelos, Las Reinas Chulas incorporate aspects of *teatro de carpa* and *teatro de revista* such as political satire, sketches, musical numbers and cross-dressing. The first element, that of political satire, is appreciated in *Nosotras las proles* through references to contemporary polemic events such as Enrique Peña Nieto’s plan to privatize Mexico’s petroleum, the firing of one of Mexico’s most honest reporters, Carmen Aristegui,⁶⁷ and the arrest of teacher union leader, Elba Esther Gordillo, to list only a few examples. This kind of engagement with and satire of current events has its roots in *teatro de revista*, which was characterized by its politically charged and dissident content. As Armando María y Campos explains, Mexican *revista* was not simply about presenting current events to a largely illiterate audience, but it was also about connecting the

⁶⁷ See “Carmen Aristegui despedida” 2011; “Despide MVS a Carmen Aristegui” 2011.

performers and writers lived experiences to the stage performance.⁶⁸ Though some, like María y Campos, contend that the politically relevant *revista* all but disappeared by the end of the 1920s, Socorro Merlín suggests that *teatro de carpa* continued in its place as a political performance form and outlet for its participants; “la carpa de las décadas de 1930 a 1950 fue un lugar propicio para ejercitar este derecho, un espacio de interpelación a la política del momento, refugio de artistas” (2). This kind of refuge of expression is something that Las Reinas Chulas take solace in and they use theatre to channel frustrations with Mexico’s current state of affairs.

Carpa and *revista* also provide Las Reinas Chulas with the possibility of performing sketches in conjunction with, or in place of, more traditional dramatic plots. Their piece, *Nosotras las proles*, is a perfect example; the organization has an overarching theme of socio-political dissidence, but is presented through a series of sketches. Re-presenting several major Golden Age films, each sketch captures the broader objective of the work, but can also be understood on its own. As part of these segments, the women integrate musical numbers, referencing the theatrical traditions of the past as well as the cinematic integration of musical performance. This approach resonates with Merlín’s observation, “en el Teatro Bar, ambiente de restaurantes y cabarets, también han incursionado actores profesionales para presentar sketches, obras cortas, bailes y canciones que recuerdan otras épocas” (1). Though Merlín writes about early twentieth-century performances, she could just as easily be describing *Nosotras las proles* and the work of Las Reinas Chulas more broadly. As proprietors of their own teatro-bar, *El Vicio*, having professionally studied theatre and via their re-consideration of Golden Age classics, their performance style is definitely a call to another time. Expanding further upon the musical element, as ex-students of *cabareter@s* Tito Vasconcelos, Astrid Hadad, Jesusa

⁶⁸ María y Campos states, “no es cosa de pedir argumento a una revista. Estas piezas se originan con algún pretexto, más o menos original, y los autores lo repiten hasta la saciedad. Además, la revista precisa de la actualidad. Viven lo que vive el suceso o el hecho que les dio vida” (*Género Chico* 22).

Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe, all for whom music is paramount, Las Reinas Chulas' works reflects their artistic connection to these performers and *carpa* and *revista* traditions.

The last of the notable characteristics that Las Reinas Chulas incorporate from the past is the element of cross-dressing. As I already discussed, the act of male-to-female drag is more widely noted in relation to *carpa* and *revista* performances. Yet, there are noteworthy female performers who used female-to-male drag as part of their performance style, such as Mimi Derba, Delia Magaña and Elena Ureña (Dueñas Herrera 99-112). These women primarily appeared in drag as part of comic sketches which were developed “a partir de caricaturas y tiras cómicas y los caricaturistas toman los tipos de la carpa para ilustrar sus sátiras” (Merlín 10). In effect, these women took the existing male caricatures, such as that of the *portero*, *peladito* and *borrachito*, and through drag, challenged gendered divisions. Even without the use of gendered drag, these women pushed the boundaries of acceptable gendered behaviors by incorporating “masculine” language, gestures and habits into their female characters. For example, Lupe Rivas Cacho, Emilia Tujillo and Amelia Wilhelmy are most widely recognized for popularizing the *borrachita* and *pelada* characters. Of these three women, in the 1909 *revista*, *México Nuevo*, Emilia Trujillo, cemented her legacy as one of most recognizable personajes populares; “salió a escena por primera vez el personaje ‘la borrachita’, que había de seguir apareciendo después en tantas revistas nacionales” (María y Campos *Género chico* 65). Affectionately known to her audiences as “La Trujis,” Pablo Dueñas Herrera explains, “quiso identificarse desde un principio como borrachita, garbancera, pelada, prostituta y mujer de arrabal” (73). In her intention to perform these less than lady-like figures she confronted gender binaries and created a path for future non-conformist female performers to follow. For example, Amelia Wilhelmy, a former student of “La Trujis,” took her drunken, urban female character from the stage to the big screen.

Appearing in the acclaimed *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) as “La guayaba,” alongside fellow rebellious female, Delia Magaña as “La tostada,” these women continued subverting expectations by crystallizing the popularity of these masculine female archetypes.

Much like my discussion of Lucha Reyes in chapter two, the aforementioned actresses used theatre to bring to life a new kind of masculinized femininity that enjoyed the temptations of drink and urban living. As influential *revista* and *carpa* characters, these *peladas* and *borrachitas*, and the actresses who played them, found greater fame on-screen with the rise of Mexico’s Golden Age of Cinema. That these women used drag aesthetics and performed a spectrum of female masculinities on-stage and on-screen signals Mexico’s long-standing tradition of rebellious potential via performance. Hence, in recuperating aspects of *carpa* and *revista*, the women of Las Reinas Chulas drag not just the past onto the present stage, but also their bodies, paying homage to these subversive early female performers.

***Nosotras las proles* (2013): Re-Imagining the Classics**

Weaving together *carpa* and *revista* traditions, interpretations of various cinematic classics and references to contemporary and historical events, *Nosotras las proles* reveals more than just Las Reinas Chulas’ grasp of Mexican culture; it is a queer act of subverting master narratives. Balancing the classic Mexican films, as Mor explains, was easy; “entonces es muy fácil digamos, o sea, la investigación ya la hiciste por vivir aquí. Y entonces a partir de eso, nada, pues pensarlo, reflexionarlo y reciclarlo. Son personajes populares que todo el mundo reconoce” (Interview 2013). This comment could also be applied to their working knowledge of contemporary events. By means of living in Mexico City the women are bound to absorb some information about the world around them, but of course, Las Reinas Chulas are not passive bodies. Rather, following the ways of Rodríguez, who Mor describes as “una persona muy

sabia,” they learned the importance of reading anything and everything in order to make poignant and timely cabaret works (Interview 2013).

At the same time, *Nosotras las proles* is not Las Reinas Chulas’ first foray into cinematic re-presentations. Their work, *Fiesten: una familia de tontas, perdón, de tantas* (2006-07), is a parody of two films: *Festen* (1998), a Danish production, and the Mexican Golden Age work, *Una familia de tantas* (1948) (Alzate, “Todo hábito” 69). Currently, the women are performing a new piece, *Todo sobre mi abuela* (2015), which combines elements of Almodóvar’s *Todo sobre mi madre* (1999), and *Los tres García* (1947), to explore the appearances of the beloved Sara García as Mexico’s typecast grandmother (<http://lasreinaschulas.com/nuestros-chous/>). The importance of Las Reinas Chulas’ cinematic integrations into *teatro-cabaret* is such that it reveals a kind of feedback loop, where *revista* and *carpa* influenced the style and content of many Golden Age films, which now influence contemporary theatre. It simultaneously points to the way *revista* and *carpa* utilized current events as fodder for their productions, similar to the way Las Reinas Chulas discuss and critique the world around them. Las Reinas Chulas’ kind of *teatro-cabaret* points to their proclivity for working the relics of the past into the present, imbuing them with a queer purpose: deviating from the path set by these cultural productions.

At the heart of *Nosotras las proles*’ revision of Mexican cinema classics is a reworking of the films’ melodramatic elements and plots. In its very basic sense, melodrama emerged out of the theatre; “the word melodrama means, originally, a drama accompanied by music” (Brooks, *Melodramatic Imagination* 14).⁶⁹ Further explaining dramatic action in relation to music, Thomas Elsaesser states that music functions as a separate, subjective element of a piece, and as a way of dramatizing the narrative; “but because it is also a form of punctuation in the above

⁶⁹ According to Brooks, melodrama “appears to have first been used in this sense by Rousseau, to describe a play in which he sought a new emotional expressivity through the mixture of spoken soliloquy, pantomime, and orchestral accompaniment” (*Melodramatic Imagination* 14).

sense, it is both functional (i.e., of structural significance) and thematic (i.e., belonging to the expressive content) because it is used to formulate certain moods” (74). Similarly, Heather Laing examines the role of music in melodramatic films, claiming that music serves an extra-linguistic function of expression, capturing emotions and events that cannot be adequately expressed through words (14). Connecting this to the specific context of Latin American melodrama, Darlene Siedler suggests, “diegetic music is fundamental to Latin American melodrama, and, as I have indicated, the spectacular dance numbers and stirring vocals in these films have few equivalents in Hollywood pictures of the type” (7). Fleshing out the importance of music to the melodramatic model, and more broadly its role in the Latin American context, allows me to understand the way music is just one of the many objects that *Las Reinas Chulas* subvert.

Melodrama’s deep-seated relation to emotional excess and representations of the family unit are also pivotal aspects of my consideration of melodramatic objects. As Peter Brooks observes, one of the fundamental characteristics of melodrama is the act of expressing all, but in a way that links the element of emotive expression to the configuration of the family; “the characters stand on stage and utter the unspeakable, give voice to their deepest feelings...They assume primary psychic roles, father, mother, child, and express basic psychic conditions” (4). Elsaesser’s examination of contemporary American film echoes this connection to the family, stating “melodramas often use middle-class American society, its iconography and the family experience” (82) and that this setting of the middle-class home is “emphasized by the function of the décor and the symbolization of objects” (84). This comment reflects the role of objects in relation to melodrama and family, though in a literal fashion. However, rather than the home and its décor, I consider the very notion of the family unit and emotional relationships as objects.

Honing in on music, the family unit, social context and emotional excess allows me to conduct a queer reading of the work of Las Reinas Chulas that engages the work of Sara Ahmed and her discussion of the creation of objects, directionality and queerness. As Ahmed suggests, “compulsory heterosexuality produces a ‘field of heterosexual objects,’ by the very requirement that the subject ‘give up’ the possibility of other love objects” (87). She also proclaims “bodies become straight by ‘lining up’ with lines that are already given” (Ahmed 23). Hence, future generations follow this straight path by lining up with and move towards it, replicating and repeating the heterosexual actions. The way Mexican cinema produced films with specific notions of *mexicanidad*, of which heterosexuality was extremely important, permits an understanding of how these notions created a predetermined path. Embedded within this idea is the role of directionality and deviation that facilitates my connection between Golden Age films as objects and queerness. *Nosotras las proles* is an example of how Las Reinas Chulas did not repeat the norms and conventions of the Golden Age, but rather, deviated from the well-established path. Because of this, their *teatro-cabaret* style is a rich site of “deviant” and queer representations. As self-identifying lesbians, the four women also embody Ahmed’s idea that “the queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant” (21). Through their own non-conformative (read non -heteronormative) sexuality and deviating interpretations, Las Reinas Chulas challenge the meanings associated with the objects of the past and create a space for queer bodies within the concept of being Mexican.

Thinking about Golden Age Cinema as a system of objects, though, requires acknowledging the relationship between viewers and the projected narratives. As Ana Francis Mor explained, she and countless other Mexicans grew up watching these classic films on television. Like in examples from my previous chapters, her exposure to the films did not lead to

a passive acceptance of the situations and characters, but rather, an oppositional gaze. According to Susan Denver, these melodramas of the 1940s served to “inculcate women and men as ‘appropriately’ gendered citizens” while at the same time “offered opportunities for spectators to identify against expectation” (10). Denver’s observation of identifying against resonates with the work of Manthia Diawara, bell hooks and Anne Friedberg, all of whom propose varying degrees of identifying against, rejecting and opposing the screen-story. For Diawara, part of the importance in rejecting the screen-story is the “intermediary spaces, during the process of identification, where the spectator recuperates his/her identities and interrupts the symbolic system of a master narrative” (“Black British Cinema” 36). What he signals is the spectator’s inability to accept the powerful master narratives results in breaking away from them.

In the case of Mexican cinema, *Las Reinas Chulas*’ inability to accept Golden Age narratives emphasizes the intermediary spaces where they recuperate and solidify their identities as non-conformist bodies. As Anne Friedberg asserts with regards to female spectators, “in the cinema, in both cases, her *difference* from the screen star is vanquished, she is neither the female-as-represented nor is she the male-as-represented” (42). This *her* can serve as a way to appreciate the four female members of *Las Reinas Chulas* and their difference; part of their inability to accept the Golden Age representations of family, sexuality and characters is because, as lesbians, they do not identify with the women or men projected on-screen. As such, in their inability to accept, and their opposition of the narratives of *mexicanidad*, they do not just recuperate their identities in an intermediary space, but exist within it.

Nosotras las proles is also a performance that enacts efforts to disidentify with the past by means of turning away from its heteronormative expectations. According to Muñoz, performances are examples of just how opposition transforms into an act of disidentification, an

act of subversion and rebellion. Speaking broadly, Muñoz's states, "this collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt" (6). This is apt for considering *Nosotras las proles*, in which the representational contract of compulsory heteronormative ideals is broken. In its place, the piece proposes new modes of being that in their deviation from the heteronormative path, are queer. Combining several Golden Age works, the piece resonates with Muñoz's assertion that "the process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification" (31). By scrambling and re-constructing various films, the work of *Las Reinas Chulas* empowers them as minority figures. At the same time, *Nosotras las proles* is an act of disidentification facilitating a broader opportunity to empower racial, social or sexual Others, previously excluded from definitions of *mexicanidad*. To highlight this, my approach to *Nosotras las proles* examines the piece collectively for the way it reorients the Golden Age classics, rather than explore each individual film's re-presentation. I arrange my analysis around the following themes: Temporal Re-Orientation, Re-Envisioning Pedro Infante and the Melodramatic Family, Performing Female Masculinities and Racial Tropes.

Temporal Re-Orientation: Binding, Cyclical and Repeating Time

Applying the notion of objects and orientations, *Nosotras las proles* reveals possibilities for not only turning away from the Golden Age classics, but also for turning them on their heads. One of the ways this 2013 performance functions as a queer act of subversion is its reorientation, or perhaps even disorientation, of linear notions of time. Returning to the connection between

time and objects, both Sara Ahmed and Elizabeth Freeman propose similar suggestions about binding as a way of connecting bodies and objects. They also suggest that in this binding resides a means of queering the objects and their temporal associations. By putting Ahmed's assertion that "orientations are binding as they bind objects together" (88) into dialogue with Freeman's statement that "time, then, not only 'binds' flesh into bodies and bodies into social but also appears to 'bind' history's wounds" (*Time Binds* 7), allows me to examine Golden Age Cinema as an object of the past that binds bodies together. As Pedro Infante biographer José Infante Quintanilla describes:

los fines de semana los canales libres y la televisión restringida, satelital o por cable, se encargan de retransmitir sus películas en horarios familiares, y no importa si ya las hemos visto una, dos, o más veces, pues ya se ha convertido en una tradición tan cercana que, para muchos, algunas frases o escenas de sus cintas han pasado a formar parte de su lenguaje cotidiano. (153)

Echoing Ana Francis Mor's statement, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Infante Quintanilla illustrates how the films themselves are bound together just as they bind Mor, Infante Quintanilla, and many more Mexican bodies together in the experience of watching them. With regards to *Nosotras las proles*, by jointly considering time and objects as binding, I explore them as queer binding forces in the following ways: (1) How *Nosotras las proles*' internal re-organization of Golden Age films queers those productions and their chronological release dates; (2) References to historical and present-day socio-political wounds that reveal hybrid, stagnant and cyclical time; (3) The connectedness between neoliberal policies and the dissident voice of *teatro-cabaret* to expose the abuse of already marginalized bodies.

The first of my considerations explores the way *Las Reinas Chulas* reorganize chronological time through their performance, and by default, reorient the cinematic objects they depict on-stage. In doing this, their efforts are meant to unsettle both the past and the narratives

of the films themselves. As lesbians, Ahmed would explain how the sexual orientation of each Reina Chula has led them off the path towards heteronormativity, and onto a deviant one. Once on this deviant path, no longer moving towards accepting master narratives, as Freeman suggests, homosexual bodies become dissidents, “figures for and bearers of new corporeal sensations, including those of a certain counterpoint between now and then, and of occasional disruptions to the sped-up and hyperregulated time of industry” (*Time Binds* 7). In applying this Las Reinas Chulas, as queer bodies, they use performances such as *Nosotras las proles* as a means of disrupting and disidentifying with the hyperregulated notion of linear (read straight) chronology and the film industry.

Using a sketch-like format, the *Nosotras las proles* presents the Golden Age films out of order⁷⁰ and combines the seminal work, *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) with characters and events from its sequel, *Ustedes los ricos* (1948). The first scene begins with the *Nosotros los pobres* projection of the two children reading the book, and yet, the appearance of characters and dialogue from *Ustedes los ricos* signals an overlap between the two films. For example, though the visual continue throughout the scene come from *Nosotros los pobres*, the following conversation refers a key event in *Ustedes los ricos* when la Chorreada mourns over her dead son, “el torito”:

CHORREADA: Las cenizas del torito

CHACHITA: ¡Torito! Desde que se nos quemó...”; (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 16);

Second, these re-makes poke fun at when Ata notices Chachita’s haircut:

ATA: Celia, Chachita... Chachita, te cortastes tus trenzas?

⁷⁰ The sketches are arranged in the following order: (1) *Nosotros los pobres/Ustedes los ricos* (1948); (2) *Los tres García* (1947); (3) *Ángelitos negros* (1948); (4) *Tizoc* (1957); (5) *Nosotros los pobres/Ustedes los ricos* (1948).

CHACHITA: Eso fue desde hace dos películas Atarantado. (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 17)

By rupturing the chronological timeline of these Golden Age films, as well as combining two of the most important Mexican films ever made, *Las Reinas Chulas* subvert the seminal representations of *mexicanidad* and expose the falsity upon which they were constructed.

In their chronological reorganization, time serves to bind bodies together throughout different temporal moments and expose the wounds those bodies share. By bringing together the 1940s and the present, the piece creates a hybrid temporal experience that also reflects moments of development and crisis. Emerging out of a period of Revolution, as historians Joseph Gilbert, Anne Rubinstein and Eric Zolov suggest, “the familiar narrative of post-1940 Mexico fails to accommodate the numerous contradictions and nuances embedded within the daily life of the period” (6). Meaning essentially that the state-supported cultural productions, aimed at creating the images, sounds and identity that characterized Mexican identity, was still rife with flaws in the narrative. Focusing on the economic and political atmosphere of the 1980s, Alex Saragoza and Graciela Berkovich suggest several factors contributing to Mexico’s more current state of instability (27).⁷¹ Though not a violent upheaval, the ramifications of the 1982 Mexican peso crisis, the 1985 shattering earthquake, 1994 signing of NAFTA and 2012 return of the PRI, are all moments that irrevocably changed the nation’s landscape. In this sense, *Nosotras las proles* wades through the murky waters of these unstable and divisive times.

Among the wounds that *Las Reinas Chulas* address in their piece is the impact of social and political policies that further abuse the poor. The title of the piece, *Nosotras las proles* is not just a rewording of *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), but also a critique of the mentality the current

⁷¹ Saragoza and Berkovich state: “as a consequence, since 1982 the neoliberal project has stabilized the economy, increasing substantially the revival of both national and international investment. On the other hand, the same period has witnessed declining wages for workers, exacerbating the division of wealth in Mexican society” (27).

President, Enrique Peña Nieto, and his family hold towards the poor. As a pre-Presidential candidate, Peña Nieto was asked about his favorite books, and much like former U.S. President George Bush Jr., did not have an answer. Critiqued and made fun of by the public, Peña Nieto's daughter took to Twitter to defend her father: “un saludo a toda la bola de pendejos, que forman parte de la prole y sólo critican a quien envidian! (sic)” (“Hija de Peña Nieto”). Though Peña Nieto responded to the public, “definitivamente fue un exceso y me disculpo públicamente por ello. Hablé con mis hijos sobre el valor del respeto y la tolerancia, les reiteraré que debemos escuchar y no ofender a los demás” (Orozco), the damage was done. Peña Nieto and his family had clearly defined themselves as part of “the haves” versus “have nots,” the vast majority in Mexico.

Reclaiming the title of prole, *Las Reinas Chulas* expand upon the other abuses the poor suffer like limited access to quality food, education and respect as a basic human right.

Reflecting on Peña Nieto's suggested education reforms,⁷² Chachita explains the importance of education:

ATA: ¿Y pa' qué necesitamos educación?

CHACHITA: Pa' no tener prejuicios, pa' acabar con los méndigos estereotipos que os carcomen la vida. Esta gente nos ve pobres. Pa' que la gente vaya a ver otros shows y no como estos, imagínate que creen que esto es cultura. Está viendo y no ve.” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 11)

Satirizing how Golden Age Cinema and melodrama have educated Mexico's public since the 1940s, this Chachita suggests that a different kind of education is needed to break the cycle of prejudices, such as those held by Mexico's First Family and powerful political elite. The characters also use “el habla carente de refinamiento” (Monsiváis, *Espejo* 148), embedded in popular memory since the 1948 *Nosotros los pobres* classic, to immediately signal their socio-

⁷² For more information about educational reforms see Torres 2013; Padilla Fajardo 2013.

economic separation from the elite. Nearing the end, the piece replaces the *Nosotros los pobres* ending with that of *Ustedes los ricos* (1948). However, there is no wealthy figure who proclaims that the poor “son valientes, que tienen corazones tan grandes” (*Ustedes los ricos*), but rather, an on-stage Chachita who laments “¿Por qué a los pobres nos toca siempre vivir la tragedia y a estos méndigos (*al público*) no’ más reírse?” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 17). As if the poor are meant only for entertainment purposes, as would seem to be the case in making box-office hits out of their suffering, this prole directs her question to the audience to provoke an ethical consideration of why the poor continue to be bullied by the rich and powerful.

Nosotras las proles’ hybrid re-presentation of chronological time is complicated by cyclical and stagnating qualities. Specifically, I am suggesting that the piece links repeating experiences with the associations drag has with “retrogression, delay” (Freeman “Packing History” 728). The relationship between time and binding bodies, as Freeman describes, “even as it suggests connectivity, ‘binds’ also names a certain fixity in time, a state of being timebound, belated, incompletely developed, left behind or not there yet, going nowhere” (“Time Binds” 61). This reflection elucidates a way of thinking about *Nosotras las proles* as redirecting time while simultaneously presenting it as incomplete, stagnating or even repeating. This is reinforced by the very structure of the piece, opening and closing with re-enactments of *Nosotros los pobres*. Moreover, there are several references in the script to time repeating itself, such as this Chorreada’s statement, “Chamacos, disfruten sus últimos días de tórtolos y vagos porque ora que ya regresó el PRI” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 1 2). This cyclical and dragging time of *Nosotras las proles*, however, is best exemplified in the production’s rendition of the sonically familiar, “Ni hablar mujer.” Las Reinas Chulas have re-written the song, echoing the on-stage characters’

references to the past converging on the present. Focusing on just the first verse, the *Nosotros los pobres* neighborhood originally sings:

Qué bonito es el reír
 Qué bonito es el querer
 Qué bonito es el vivir

¡Ni hablar mujer! (*Nosotros los pobres*)

In the *Nosotras las proles* version, Chorreada and her chorus of Ata and Chachita sing:

CHORREADA:
 Que bonito es mi país
 Ora que ya volvió el PRI
 Ya lo vamos a explotar

ATA Y CHACHITA:
 Privatizar. (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 1 2)

At the end of the play, the trio sing again, though changing the original lyrics once more:

CHORREADA:
 Que bonito es mi país
 Que bonita es mi ciudad
 Que bonito es trabajar

CORO:
 Sin progresar (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 18)

These two sonic examples demonstrate how Las Reinas Chulas exacted a part of the classic Golden Age film, much like transporting an object from one place to another. Moreover, by means of recontextualizing and re-writing of the classic song, Las Reinas Chulas' version is drags this sonic object from the past into the present, facilitating a subversive and queer rendering of the original. Rather than praise the wonderful qualities of the poor Mexico neighborhood and its morally virtuous inhabitants, as the original version does, *Nosotras las proles* condemns the way the nation's repetitive, wounding and exploitative tendencies.

Embedded in the above examples are references to the return of the PRI, and with it, the neoliberal ideas that direct Mexican political decisions, which reflect a broader correlation between the political agenda and time. According to Freeman, “in the neoliberalist project continues to reconstruct time in these ways as it ‘develops’ new regions for profit, and additionally depends upon the idea of capital’s movement as itself an inexorable progress that will eventually accommodate select women, people of color, and queers” (58). While Freeman signals neoliberalism’s connection to time as a promise of progress, the *Las Reinas Chulas* version of the Abuela from *Los tres García* (1947) points to the more realistic result of stagnation a repetition. Directing her fury towards one of her grandsons for having sold the family land, she exclaims: “En 20 años el neoliberalismo ha puesto tantas trampas y hemos ido cayendo en ellas. ¿Y ahora vendes la tierra? ¿Cómo se te ocurre venderla? ¿No tienes escrúpulos! ¿Cuánto dices que te dieron?” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 2 5). The following conversation between Abuela and Luis Antonio highlights the failures of neoliberal “development” in the Mexican context:

LUIS ANTONIO: ¡Juntos los quería agarrar, vendepatrias! De ti Luis Manuel podía esperar que vendieras la tierra donde nacimos pero de ti José Luis ¡nunca me imaginé que vendieras el pozo de agua del pueblo a la Coca Cola, infeliz!

ABUELA: ¡Cálmense, tranquilos todos! Y tu Luis Antonio ni te hagas el bueno, que además de haver vendido el pozo petrolero que teníamos vendiste la patente del maguey a los gringos. (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 2 6)

Just as the *Nosotras las proles* re-write of *Nosotros los pobres* examines the abuses of the poor, here the revision of *Los tres García* exposes how neoliberal decisions have irreversibly impacted Mexico’s natural resources and its rural communities. The original film, part of the *comedia ranchera* genre, is a story that showcases rural traditions and familial ties. According to Jacqueline Avila, “the *comedia ranchera* synthesized several crucial elements of cultural

nationalism” (122), which in part, was facilitated through cinematic invocations of “nostalgic visions of Mexican ‘traditional’ life” (Nájera-Ramírez, “Engendering” 1), such as in *Los tres García* (1947). Yet, this nostalgic vision and sense of tradition is reworked to fit a contemporary neoliberal Mexico in the 2013 *Las Reinas Chulas* version. As the above mentioned conversation between this on-stage Abuela and Luis Antonio demonstrate, their preoccupations focus on the lost social connections caused by decisions to sell Mexico; decisions motivated by the hope of progress and financial gain, the major tenants of neoliberalism. Selling water, land, maguey, and petroleum are just some examples of the way this revised García family critiques decisions made by Mexico’s political elite in the name of “progress,” that actually deprive the nation’s citizens.

Pedro Infante: Quintessential Figure of Mexican Melodrama

In the context of Mexican Golden Age Cinema, melodrama is an inextricable element of constructing *mexicanidad*. As Carlos Monsiváis explains, within the Mexican context, the value of melodrama is intimately linked to the perceived sensation that one is fighting for “sacred” values: patriotism; the family unit, honor; and personal identity (Monsiváis *Espejo* 125).⁷³ Though echoing Brooks, Monsiváis also introduces a more complex consideration of the emotional element that hinges upon competing ideological and moral actors to reveal a kind of truth about lived-experiences. Similarly, Susan Denver states, “whether Golden Age film employed the terms of historical, maternal, or paternal/patriarchal melodrama, via the genre of s it could deliver high-resolution truths”(13). As part of these truths, the composition and gendered division of the family unit were essential. Alex Saragoza and Graciela Berkovich reflect upon the relationship between the state and projections of ideologies; “not surprisingly, patriarchy and

⁷³ Monsiváis states: “el ‘prestigio íntimo’ (del melodrama), en ese contexto, tiene que ver con la sensación de estar allí, en la butaca, defendiendo valores sagrados: el amor a la patria, a la madre, a la familia, a los hijos, a la honra, a la identidad personal” (*Espejo* 125)

paternalism framed Mexican cinema, where the representations of women offered eloquent testimony to the state as a patriarchal symbol” (27). Embedded within these statements is the idea that the construction of “appropriate” gendered actions rested upon deeply entrenched Catholic definitions of morality and decency; “además, la materia prima del melodrama de familia – el pecado y la abnegación sufriente – devienen componentes esenciales de la tradición cristiana” (López, *Hollywood* 89). What makes this last observation compelling is how the state framed the family unit around Catholic binary moral codes, revealing the firmly established family roles and heterosexual conceptions of *mexicanidad* proliferated via Golden Age Cinema.

Of primary interest for this section is melodrama’s contribution to the construction of heteronormative images and expectations of masculinity. To do this, I examine the masculine characteristics as embodied and performed by a single actor: Pedro Infante. This is because, as so many have written, Pedro Infante is not just an actor, but also the quintessential image of the Mexican macho, virility and moral decency. In *Leyes de querer*, Monsiváis explores the different sides of Pedro Infante with a critical lens. And yet, even he falls into the trap of idolizing the star with statements like, “un actor *sincero*, y Pedrito lo es sin duda, trasciende el papel y los diálogos asignados, y le transmite al público ‘la condición humana’, se defina como se quiera” (Monsiváis, *Leyes* 127) and “el personaje de Infante es *muy mexicano* y eso, que o no dice nada o dice lo que cada uno tenga a bien, en su caso, típico y también singular, es la costumbre vuelta ideología” (*Leyes* 134). Pedro Infante’s official biographer, José Ernesto Infante Quintanilla, makes similar claims, “su imagen filmica, aun después de muerto, ha condicionado comportamientos sociales e incluso podría decirse que es, en muchos aspectos, un reflejo de nuestra esencia” (165). What these writers, and many others, signal is the way Pedro Infante rose

above the status of actor to embody the revered qualities of *mexicanidad* approved by the state and the actor's adoring public.

While I could continue to list more hagiographic comments about Infante, the variety of roles he played were not only central to his popularity, but also to *Nosotras las proles*. Reviving several of the actor's most well known films such as *Los tres García* (1947) *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), *Ustedes los ricos* (1948), *Angelitos negros* (1948) and *Tizoc* (1957), points to Infante's versatility as an actor and the range of "human conditions" he depicted on-screen. That he consistently garnered his audience's approval, regardless of the role, is part of what led to his success and iconic stature. As Mexican film scholar Anne Rubinstein explains, "Infante's slipping among roles – within his movies, between his movies, and between his movies and his 'real' public life – helped reassure his audience about the possibilities of their own lives. Like most of them, he had left behind a rural life that looked happier in retrospect" ("Bodies" 221). From humble beginnings, Infante captures the "rags to riches" story that so many Mexicans wish for (and saw in countless films). In this sense, the plurality of screen-story characters allowed audiences not only to identify with the filmic representations, but also with the actor himself as the very embodiment of *mexicanidad*.

As one of the most widely-recognized and loved actors of Mexican film history, Pedro Infante's cinematic appearances have recently stimulated interest in possibilities for reading his performances against the grain of heteronormative masculinity. Returning to the work of Laura Mulvey and the gaze, she states, "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" (204). While I have explored this notion in relation to female characters, it is particularly

useful for appreciating Pedro Infante as an eroticized body and object. The making of Infante's body into an erotic object was first and foremost made possible through the camera lens, which, "while technically neutral, this look, as we have seen, is inherently voyeuristic and usually 'male' in the sense of a man doing the filming" (Kaplan 210). Though in this statement Ann Kaplan speaks generally of American cinema, this observation holds true when applied to Infante's career. In reference to the films being considered in this chapter, four out of the five were directed and produced by Ismael Rodríguez, and one by his brother, Joselito Rodríguez. Nearly all of the crewmembers and production staff on these films, and the period of Golden Age Cinema more broadly, were also men. In this sense, the way Pedro Infante's body was depicted on-screen is inherently connected to the way men gazed upon another man's body.

Heralded as the macho figure, and icon of women's weepies (Denver 10), it is logical to assume Infante's body was framed as an erotic object to fulfill the desire of his female fans. And yet, the all-male production crew's gaze upon Infante's body suggests a rupture in the male-gaze-upon-female system of desire. In reference to homosexual imagery in Mexican film, Bernard Shulz-Cruz explains, "of course, what has unleashed this gay iconography is fundamentally the desire, based on physical attraction, of one man for another. This attraction first makes itself apparent in the gaze, a man catching sight of another man" (7). Though this kind of homosexual desire and gaze was not the official or intended outcome of Golden Age productions, in the case of Infante, it was reinforced over and over again by the camera's focus on the actor's body. Sergio de la Mora states, "Infante's body, particularly his muscular upper torso, is frequently displayed in his films" (84), signaling the complacency of the actor, film makers and cinematographers in transforming Infante into a sexualized object for both male and female spectators. Moreover, de la Mora asserts that the way Infante exposed his body for the camera

(read also cameramen and director) are moments “of pure spectacle that clearly encourage the spectator to take pleasure in looking at his body as an erotic object” (84); spectators being inclusive of men and women. Echoing the importance of Infante’s half naked body, which appears in almost every one of his films, Monsiváis claims “su patrimonio actoral es el cumplimiento de los requisitos de guapura, y lo que uno le atribuya al dramatismo de los *pecs*” (128). Epitomizing masculine beauty and physique, this statement also points to how Infante’s body has become, in many ways, a desirable object separate from the actor himself. In addition, Infante’s body-as-object has shaped the efforts of generations of Mexican men towards achieving this external (and superficial) representation of *mexicanidad*.

Reading Pedro Infante’s appearances and his body as objects that created fissures within narratives of heteronormativity is especially important for my subsequent analysis of *Nosotras las proles*. As lesbian spectators of these Golden Age Classics, the women of *Las Reinas Chulas* opposed gazing upon and rejected the sexualization of Pedro Infante’s body. At the same time, the opening for non-heterosexual gazes, even subtle or unintentional, facilitate an approach to re-working the relics of the past. In their turning away from Golden Age depictions of Mexican identity and heteronormative sexuality, *Las Reinas Chulas* embarked upon a deviant path, but one that had already been unearthed by homosexual (openly or closeted) male desire and gazing. As such, their re-interpretations are not just acts of disidentification, but also queer acts of subversion that propose an entirely different version of Golden Age *mexicanidad*.

Absenting Pedro Infante: Re-Envisioning The Melodramatic Family Unit

Nosotras las proles enacts a queer vision of the traditional cinematic depictions of the quintessential masculine figure and his family unit. As Carlos Monsiváis claims “en la Época de Oro la industria filmica potencia y modifica a la Gran Familia Mexicana, y rehace las versiones

de la *mexicanidad* al difundir el nacionalismo como *show*, una propuesta aceptada con no demasiadas variantes entre 1930 y 1960, aproximadamente” (Leyes 136). The implications are three-fold: (1) The filmic representations of family are spectacles for popular consumption; (2) This construction of *mexicanidad* relies on the interrelated nature of national imagery and melodrama; (3) The replication of specific family models allows me to explore them as objects that Las Reinas Chulas rework and queer. In the first of these considerations, that the “Gran Familia Mexicana” is described as essentially a formula, reproduced time and again throughout the Golden Age of cinema, points to the falsity upon which notions of family were created. This image of the family unit, not only reproduced between 1930-1960, but replayed over the last fifty years on popular television, transforms it into an object, easily consumed by viewers of the past and present. Part of the public’s interest in Golden Age films and the popularity of the on-screen families is the intimate connection between family and melodrama, as I earlier described. As a sacred value, the family is an example of melodramatic structures that informed acceptable Mexican behaviors. In this sense, not only is the family unit transformed into an object, but encased in melodramatic conventions, melodrama itself is an object.

To achieve this, my analysis focuses on the way Pedro Infante is absented from his iconic role in this stage production. Never appearing on stage, Infante’s character from from *Angelitos negros* (1948), José Carlos and his character, Pepe “El Toro,” from *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) are only mentioned from within the mimetic space. The importance of this is that Las Reinas Chulas do not simply write Infante out of Golden Age history, but rather make him absent in order to re-define and re-imagine standards of *mexicanidad* and masculinity. By removing the father figure from these on-stage families and the quintessential image of urban Mexican manliness, Las Reinas Chulas undo the tidy package of family values, replacing it with a deviant

restructuring. By removing Infante and his characters, *Las Reinas Chulas* not only signal the ease of treating them like easily replaceable objects, but also reinforce the message that holding on to the expectations of the past no longer meets the needs of contemporary Mexican reality.

In the *Angelitos negros* (1948), Ana Luisa and José Carlos face challenges in creating their family unit, though not because of financial reasons.⁷⁴ The *Las Reinas Chulas* rendition emphasizes this element, re-framing Ana Luisa as having a strong interest in the value of material things and as such, the values epitomized by Pedro Infante/José Carlos have been replaced by masculinity characterized by interest in economic and political gain. For example, the on-stage Ana Luisa/Emilia Guiú speaks of her desire for a powerful Carlos rather than her husband. Despite her assurances that she is not interested in his “36 mansions, ni tu Ferrari, ni el avión privado de tu hija, no es tu yate, y todas tus pertenencias las que me calientan, eres tú, tus orejitas...tu pelona...Grrr... Por cierto, estoy harta de cargar con este marido” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 3 9), she is convincing no one. The Carlos this on-stage Emilia speaks of could be one of three powerful and rich options: Carlos Slim, Carlos Salinas de Gortari or Carlos Romero Deschamps. Throughout the skit, both Slim and Deschamps are mentioned, but the reference to baldness rules out Slim. While the reference to ears could easily be a joke about ex-President Salinas’ features, the list of properties, riches and baldness could belong to either him or Deschamps. What is important is not necessarily identifying which Carlos is dietetically impacting the lives of this on-stage mother and daughter duo, but that both represent the socio-economic inequality and political corruption of contemporary Mexico. Additionally, that this Ana Luisa/Emilia seeks to replace the honest and hardworking filmic José Carlos with a

⁷⁴ The basic plotline of the film is as follows: “José Carlos contrae matrimonio con Ana Luisa, dama de la alta sociedad, cuyas verdaderas raíces raciales ella misma desconoce. Su apatía y despotismo por las personas negras hace de su carácter un ser amargado” (Amezcuea Castillo 77). The topic of race is discussed in the last section of this chapter.

quintessential figure of neoliberal politics reinforces the abuses that my previous section on temporality discussed.

In the 1948 *Angelitos negros*, the melodramatic tensions stem from the fact that this family is not an idealized version, but one wrought with contradictory feelings about race and superiority. Hence, the absence of José Carlos/Pedro Infante from the *Nosotras las proles* representation of the film does more than subvert the Golden Age family unit; it exposes the hypocrisy and contrived quality of the on-screen family and paternalism. Las Reinas Chulas have taken the film and turned it on its head, making the racist mother a prominent figure while removing the supportive masculine presence. At stake in this reorientation of roles is that it captures how the “idealization of family and of traditional morality” (Saragoza and Berkovich 27) of Golden Age Cinema was created to fit the goals of dominant state ideology.

José Carlos’ invisibility from *Nosotras las proles*, while important, is overshadowed by the fact that the most famous filmic figure of masculinity and paternal presence, Pepe “el Toro”, is absent from the *teatro-cabaret* piece. Even nearing 70 years later, *Nosotros los pobres* is the most widely viewed film in Mexico, thanks in large part to being frequently replayed on television.⁷⁵ According to Infante Quintanilla, in the 1948 classic, “Pedro Infante y Blanca Estela destacaron los elementos esenciales del melodrama” (67), which, as Monsiváis explains mean that, “los conflictos y los desgarramientos se suceden en un vértigo apenas aliviado por unos cuantos chistes y canciones, y refrendan la naturaleza del melodrama-a-la-mexicana” (*Espejo* 148). These qualities of the Mexican melodrama and its representation of the world as the state,

⁷⁵ See Ayala Blanco, 97; Monsiváis *Leyes*, 27.

screen writers and producers imagined it, became real by inoculating the public with values⁷⁶ embodied in the film's virtuous archetypal couple, Pepe el Toro and Celia la Chorreada.

Having informally studied this film for decades by watching it on television, the believability of these on-stage Las Reinas Chulas versions of cinematic characters extends to their mannerisms and speech patterns. Internalizing these qualities, just as Monsiváis, Bonilla and many other film scholars propose as the purpose of Golden Age Cinema, is also a reflection of the intentionality behind these remakes. An example of what Michael Kirby calls "complex acting," the women of Las Reinas Chulas completely transform themselves into the character they are playing by incorporating visual, sonic and movement cues (9, also see Schechner 147). What complicates this complex acting, though, is the pervasiveness Golden Age Cinema as a model for performing *mexicanidad*. The performers in *Nosotras las proles* simultaneously enact "restored behavior," as per Schechner's model, as much as they perform "twice-behaved behaviors" (29). The difference between these two being that restored behavior implies a kind of passive absorption and unconscious performance of cues whereas twice-behaved behavior is conscious, as in theatre. By being consciously aware of the ways Golden Age Cinema shaped their behaviors, their movements, attitudes, speech and social bonds, *Nosotras las proles* showcases how all of this was a construction that can be reformulated.

Just as Ismael Rodríguez and Pedro de Urdemalas created *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) in such a way that the film, its characters and melodramatic twists would be sure to garner the public's admiration, Las Reinas Chulas have created their own captivating, yet deviant, version of the "Gran Familia Mexicana" (Monsiváis *Leyes* 136), devoid of the iconic Pedro Infante. The piece begins with the projection of the book and neighborhood from the film. Yet, the characters

⁷⁶ For Monsiváis, these values include: "el manejo de ternura, devociones familiares y solidaridad que no sólo compensa, también arraiga en el desamparo" (*Espejo* 144).

who first appear are Chachita and Ata, “(*Entre Chachita y atrás corriendo el Ata*)” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 1 1), not the “personajes populares” from the original. Moreover, as previously discussed, the relationship between these two developed in *Ustedes los ricos* signals Las Reinas Chulas’ turning away from and reorganization of the original *Nosotros los pobres*. The next character to appear is Celia, la Chorreada, followed by the mute grandmother, “(*Sacan a la abuela y juegan con ella*)” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 1 3). Overlooking momentarily these differences, the characters visibly resemble their on-screen counterparts. With Ata in his jean overalls, white t-shirt and cap, Chachita in her modest white dress, la Chorreada in her blue dress and white apron, and Abuela física in her wheelchair, covered by her blanket, these on-stage costumes visually seem to indicate that *Nosotras las proles* is a remake. In addition, the actors sound and move like their on-screen counterparts, making these role version of Ata, Chachita, Abuela and Chorreada even more convincing. Yet, despite these visual and sonic cues, the satirical and politically engaged dialogue convinces any listener that this is a different interpretation of the Golden Age classic.

Nosotras las proles consciously utilizes the melodramatic conventions of emotional excess as a way of satirizing and subverting associations with *mexicanidad*. Nearing the end of the piece, Ata and Chachita embrace one another on the side of the stage. Standing center stage, Chorreada emphatically recites the various ways Mexican bodies are excluded and abused. With each recitation like, “Ay, las asesinadas en Juarez, ¡Ay! Sientes que te duele, sientes una punzada en el corazón y nada más dices...” (*Nosotras las proles* Performance 2013), Chorreada doubles over, as if her statement physically causes her pain. Meanwhile, Ata and Chachita shout cries of sadness. Chorreada quickly composes herself and says, “Resignación” as if it were her mantra. Enacting these painful realizations about Mexico, followed by a declaration of

resignation, Chorreada finally says, “Un día de tantos estar tragando miseria con miseria con tacos de miseria. Un día, eventualmente, qué llegue la alegría” (*Nosotras las proles* Performance 2013). Then, breaking into maniacal laughter, as if on the verge of a mental breakdown, Ata and Chachita run to her. They plead with her not to give up; it does not have to be this way. And yet, Chorreada insists that it does:

CHORREADA: No, porque son las reglas del melodrama.

CHACHITA: ¿Melodrama?

CHORREADA: Sí chamaca, que no ves que es el tono del país. Los mexicanos desde siempre vivimos en el melodrama

ATA: ¡Vóitelas! Por a lo mejor es momento de cambiar de género.

CHORREADA: Que la boca se te haga chicharrón. Ni lo mande Dios. Más vale malo por conocido que bueno...ahí nos vicentiamos. (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 18)

This self-reflexive use of melodramatic excess exposes *Las Reinas Chulas*' astutely satirical critique of how the performative conventions of fictional cinematic worlds have become all too real. The way in which the original Chachita, Chorreada and Ata resign themselves to their situation as poor, marginalized and exploited bodies, is not only a source of *Las Reinas Chulas*' disidentification, but also exposed the ramifications of *resignación*. These on-stage remakes subvert this mentality of acceptance by demonstrating how it is no longer a virtue of *mexicanidad*, but a violent and oppressive quality of contemporary Mexican identity. In this sense, *Las Reinas Chulas* have taken the melodramatic facet of Golden Age Cinema and created a deviant form, one that exposes the dark and twisted ramifications of passive acquiescence.

Nosotras las proles also re-imagines melodrama's Gran Familia by means of excluding and permanently absenting the iconic male figure, Pepe el Toro/Pedro Infante. I watched attentively as the major characters appeared during the opening scene, and once again at the end,

when even “La que se levanta tarde” joins the *Nosotros los pobres* (1948) lineup. I was waiting for Pepe el Toro. Among the audience of primarily Mexican locals, I felt proud that I recognized these characters and understood their importance for Mexican popular culture. When Pepe never took the stage, though, I was confused. Why wasn’t he there? In reading the script, the motive becomes much clear. At the beginning, laying the foundation for this satirical subversion of the Golden Age classic, Chorreada says to Chachita “Pero piensa que ora que regrese el Toro del otro lado, ¿qué cuentas le voy a andar entregando?” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 1 3). This notion of returning from “the other side” is a play on words: (1) a euphemism for having passed away; (2) a reference to the vast population of Mexican men that cross the border into the United States hoping for work. At the end of the play, these on-stage characters reveal that they are working with both meanings. Resonating with the lived experiences of many Mexican families, this diegetic Pepe crossed the border to financially support his family, but would not return alive. When this 2013 “La que se levanta tarde” enters the final scene, she reveals the bad news, telling Ata, “Son las cenizas de Pepe el Toro, murió electrificado saltando la barda nueva de los gringos, y todo por querer venir a visitar a Celia en su cumpleaños (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 16).

Although the two must figure out how to tell Chachita and Chorreada, there is more bad news:

LA QUE SE LEVANTA TARDE: Pos así. Y eso no es todo, junto con las cenizas venía una carta donde Pepe el toro confiesa que sí mató a la usuerera, que Chachita es tu hermana y que siempre estuvo enamorado de Jorge Negrete.

ATA: ¿Cómo? ¿Pepe muerto? ¿Chachita mi hermana? ¿El toro puto? (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 7 16)

True to melodramatic fashion, the diegetic death and death-bed confession of the revised version of Pepe el Toro destabilizes the bedrock of the traditional Mexican family as per the *Nosotros los pobres* model. This Pepe, rather, reimagines the gentile carpenter, wrongly accused of murder, suggesting the falsity of the absolute moral integrity Golden Age Cinema perpetuated

via its screen-story poor. This Pepe also subverts macho heterosexual masculinity as *Nosotras las proles* rewrites Negrete and Infante as lovers, not enemies, deviating from the path of Golden Age heteronormativity. Although the actual death of Pedro Infante shook the nation to its core, it never unsettled his seemingly immortal presence, made possible by his countless cinematic appearances. As such, his depictions of family and masculinity continued to shape the nation long after his 1957 passing. In contrast, the diegetic death of this murderous and homosexual version Pepe immediately and completely dismantles any sense of stability for the on-stage characters and exposes Las Reinas Chulas' disidentification with the values embodied in the on-screen counterpart.

Performing Female Masculinities: The *charro* Re-make.

As an all-female troupe, Las Reinas Chulas utilize female-to-male cross-dressing as a way to drag the male figures of the past onto their own bodies and onto the stage. Once again, there are two important designations to make about this use of drag: when it is a performance unto itself and when it is part of a larger endeavor, like theatre. Nearly all scholarship on queer studies and drag culture is indebted to the seminal work of Esther Newton. Although she focuses on female-to-male drag queens, Esther Newton makes two assertions that are useful for my consideration of *Nosotras las proles*: (1) “all drag, whether formal, informal, or professional, has a theatrical structure and style. There is no drag without an actor and his audience, and there is no drag without drama (or theatricality)” (37); (2) “if the impersonation is reasonably good, the performer not only has immediately created a recognizable female form, but can draw on audience appreciation of the star” (48). In spite of the differences between our subjects of study, I expand upon Newton's notion of theatricality and drama to examine how the women of Las Reinas Chulas utilize cross-dressing as part of their theatre aesthetic. While the women do not

necessarily attempt to “pass” as a credible version of masculinity, what Newton would categorize as the male impersonator, they depict well-known figures and cinema stars on-stage, signaling similarities with male-to-female drag culture.

Rather than focus on similarities with drag queen performance style, however, the work of Las Reinas Chulas should be considered more along the standards of drag king style, an aesthetic and performance approach unto itself. The challenge in discussing female-to-male drag style, though, is that the practice of male-to-female drag has been much more widely researched and acknowledged versus the reduced acknowledgement and lesser-studied history of masculine drag practices. Only since the 1990s have masculine drag practices engaged scholars and garnered the sort of serious consideration that its female counterpart has had for much longer (Shapiro 251). In his seminal work, *Female Masculinities*, Jack Halberstam asserts, “because so little has been written about female masculinity that does not reduce it to a stereotype of the lesbian or a pathetic parody of maleness, we have yet to determine what its various relations might be to either lesbian, transgender, or masculine identifications” (241). This is particularly important because of assumed associations between cross-dressing efforts and sexual preference.⁷⁷ Yet, as Halberstam suggests, the subversive potential of gender deviations is to “explore a queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (9). Halbsertam also makes an important distinction between impersonation and drag king efforts; “whereas the male impersonator attempts to produce a plausible performance of maleness as the whole of her act, the drag king performs masculinity (often parodically) and makes the exposure of the theatricality of masculinity into the mainstay of her act” (232).

Exposing the theatricality of masculinity through drag is particularly useful for examining

Nosotras las proles. Though not the mainstay of the production, applying Halberstam’s idea, I

⁷⁷ See Butler 1993; 2006.

consider how Las Reinas Chulas weave together theatre with the theatricality of gender construction.

The way Las Reinas Chulas enact their female-to-male gendered transformations, imbued with satirical and subversive intentions, facilitates a consideration of their work as exposing the theatricality of masculinity. Halberstam claims, “performances of masculinity seem to demand a different genre of humor and performance” (*Female* 238). Sarah Murray echoes this, stating, “it is difficult to imagine successful female-to-male drag that doesn’t make fun of masculinity. In fact, making fun of masculinity seems unavoidable, as men’s seriousness about being male is one of their most prominent characteristics” (358). Though these two scholars discuss the drag king culture and humor associated with it in the context of the United States, their comments could be applied to the work of Las Reinas Chulas. As Alzate explains, for Las Reinas Chulas, “el humor siempre ha sido esencial para evitar caer en dogmatismos” (Alzate, “Fiesten” 67). Ana Francis explained, one of the greater challenges has been figuring out “cómo se construye un humor que no sea machista, porque el humor mexicano es muy machista, y hay que empezar con otras líneas de investigación” (Interview 2013). Hence, beyond the fact that they are an all-female group, their use of drag aesthetics in *Nosotras las proles* is a conscious one, meant to point out and parody the deeply engrained divisions between gendered bodies and phobic mentalities.

In their 2013 production, Las Reinas Chulas queer and subvert images of masculine figures from the Golden Age classics, *Nosotros los pobres* (1948), *Tizoc* (1957) and *Los tres García* (1947) by dragging Ata, Tizoc and the three cousins of the García family to the stage. Focusing momentarily on Ata and Tizoc, their characterizations do not diverge greatly from their cinematic appearances; both are portrayed on-screen and on this 2013 stage as impotent or childlike figures. For example, in the original film and this *teatro-cabaret* remake, Ata stutters,

struggles to find the words to express himself and can do nothing to change Chachita's unfortunate situation. Similarly, the on-screen and on-stage Tizoc speaks in short, staccato sentences, reflecting the way indigenous people are "stereotyped as childlike and superstitious" (de la Mora 86). Because of this, I focus on how dragging the heralded *charro* macho disidentifies with and destabilizes the rural constructions of acceptable masculinity. Moreover, using drag to re-present Pedro Infante's "breakthrough performance" as Luis Antonio, reveals a queering of the iconic actor himself.

The original *Los tres García* explores how the three macho cousins mediate their desires to please two women: a love interest representing their future family life and their grandmother, representing past family ties. As Amezcua Castillo succinctly describes, "*Los tres García* era una historia que enmarcaban tres personalidades características del mexicano: el mujeriego y borracho, el presumido y déspota, y el orgulloso y tímido. Tres muchachos muy valientes y amorosos de su abuela, que representaba la autoridad matriarcal para controlarlos y encauzar sus vidas" (Amezcua Castillo 62). Using the centrality of the grandmother figure in the original film, *Las Reinas Chulas* introduce the transition between scenes. Although no costuming or makeup changes occur, the script notes, "*(La abuela pasa de la paralítica a Sara García)*" (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 2 5). Because the shift from *Nosotros los pobres* to *Los tres García* is imperceptible to audience members, the on-stage Abuela's first line makes the scene change obvious. In self-reflexive satire, she says "¡Ay ya me tienen harta! ¿Por qué no'más hubo una abuela en el cine mexicano? Me traen como su pendeja de una escena a otra" (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 2 5). The humor in this statement lies in the fact that, "una actriz veterana – como Sara García – repite hasta el infinito el mismo papel" (Monsiváis, *Leyes* 78). Hence, this on-stage Abuela's comment,

coupled with the appearance of the *charro* cousins, José Luis, Luis Antonio and Luis Manuel, cement the cinematic reference to *Los tres García*.

Just as this 2013 *Abuela* is conscious of her role, the way the three machos enter reveals a non-linguistic nod to their satirical and self-aware depiction of the on-screen *charros*. Appearing one at a time, the cousins emphasize their competition with one another, as per the cinema classic. Yet, something is off about these men. Each of them enters with notably unnatural movements; their stances are wide and they take large, heavy steps. Moreover, each obviously has padding under their formfitting mariachi jackets and a sock in their skin-tight pants. With each sock larger than the last, these contemporary García “men” make their masculinity abundantly clear by posing to the side so the audience can see the size of their package and make a point of adjusting themselves in full-frontal view of the spectators. From their first moments on stage, these versions of the *charro* cousins question the “natural” qualities of masculinity, producing these overtly theatrical and parodic interpretations.

The physical appearance of these *charros* is not simply an act of dragging the female body, but also a queer act of subverting this particular version of Golden Age masculinity. At the same time, because the women of *Las Reinas Chulas* use drag, it is worthwhile to consider the kind of drag they perform. Among Halberstam’s list of female masculinities, these female-to-male transformations best fit under the category of male mimicry, in which, “the drag king takes on a clearly identifiable form of male masculinity and attempts to reproduce it, sometimes with an ironic twist and sometimes without” (*Female* 239). Emphasizing that these cross-dressing efforts are part of a theatrical performance, and not a performance unto themselves, like in drag king (or queen) acts, this definition resonates with the ironic twist *Las Reinas Chulas* add to their reproductions. In this sense, the way these women drag the Golden Age figures onto their bodies

holds subversive potential in its citation with a difference. Kathryn Rosenfeld, speaking of drag king efforts more broadly, suggests that female-to-male drag performers “alter the nature of power-over as it operates in the general culture, and claim power for themselves” (204).

Applying this to *Nosotras las proles*, the dragging efforts are humorous and ironic, but also allow Las Reinas Chulas to seize the power denied to them as women and homosexual bodies.

That these on-stage *charros* are aware of their performance of masculinity is further complicated by their reenactment of the fight scene from the end of the original film. While my intention is not to analyze the film itself, having been directed, produced and filmed by men, this on-screen moment is nothing short of fulfilling homoerotic desire wrapped in assurances of macho heterosexual masculinity. Hence, the Las Reinas Chulas version drags this rupture within Golden Age heteronormative gazing to center stage, exposing the hypocrisy of the master narratives. The film itself is a story of the three cousins competing with one another,⁷⁸ culminating in a fight scene. In this 2013 version, though, the three cousins are not competing over a love interest, but rather, attempting to outdo each other in their efforts to sell off the García land. Just as in the original, their Abuela encourages them to end their quarrels once and for all, and the three men start to punch, kick and tackle each other to the ground. When these on-stage versions of Luis Manuel, José Luis and Luis Antonio finish, they stand up, exposing their ripped open shirts and perfectly chiseled padded chests. As the audience roars with laughter, the purpose of this was to expose the queer undertones of the original film. In *Los tres García* (1947), the three men fight for several minutes, even throwing each other into the fountain. As the Abuela shouts at them to “aprender a pelear como hombres,” the camera settles upon their disheveled hair, wet, tight pants and bare chests. As earlier described, this is just one

⁷⁸Jorge Ayala Blanco explains, “*Los tres García* relata, en primera instancia, el cortejo sentimental de tres primos hermanos a una prima nacida en el extranjero” (59), which drives their competition.

of many scenes in which Pedro Infante's bare chest is the object upon which the camera's gaze, and by extension, that of the spectator, is fixed.

Queering the *charro* Sound

In addition to queering the physical image of the masculine *charro*, this scene includes a musical number to enhance the sensation of subverting the past. In itself, *charro* masculinity is intimately related to musical performance; the *charro* sings to “express his innermost sentiments through music, specifically the *canción ranchera*” (Nájera-Ramírez, “Endangering” 9). As discussed in my previous chapter, the *ranchera* genre is the quintessential Mexican music and disapproving of the female timbre and feminine expressions of emotion, the *ranchera* is the music of men. In the film, *Los tres García* (1947), all three cousins sing *rancheras*, but Luis Antonio as “el tenorio del pueblo” stands out (Ayala Blanco 61). Played by Pedro Infante, the actor was already a singing sensation from radio programs prior to taking the role. As Anne Rubenstein explains, he had a recognizable voice that sounded “as though he were singing from the heart, whether he was mourning the passing of a happier past, praising a new love, or declaring that his mother, his nation, or his northern region was the true object of all his affections” (“Bodies” 212). This vocal quality, then, only reinforced Infante's stature as the embodiment of *mexicanidad*.

The 2013 version of Luis Antonio, however, neither attempts to imitate Infante's voice nor performs the song, “Cielito Lindo,” from the scene in the film *Las Reinas Chulas* re-create. Instead, this on-stage Luis Antonio sings a version of Vicente Fernández's recent *ranchera* hit, “Vale más.” Although, as Madlen Dolar suggests, imitation of another's voice is both difficult and often unachievable because “the voice is like a fingerprint” (22), *Las Reinas Chulas* substitute Infante for Fernández's sound for other reasons. First, *Las Reinas Chulas*' goal is not

to achieve an exact replica, but a queer approximation, much like their versions of the three cousins. Second, considering Dolar's assertion that "it seems that voice stands at the axis of our social bonds, and that voices are the very texture of the social" (14), Las Reinas Chulas want to break away from the social bonds and *mexicanidad* that Infante represents. Rather, the women use Fernández's sound to allude to the presence of homosexuals, even closeted, in the world of the *ranchera*. During a 2002 concert in Guadalajara,⁷⁹ Vicente Fernández shares more than just the stage with his son, Alejandro Fernández; they share a kiss. Although the press immediately seized upon the opportunity to emphasize that the two are not "charros gays" (Mullholland 234), Alejandro has long been suspected as being homosexual.⁸⁰ Hence, within this context, the Las Reinas Chulas rendition seeks to not only turn away from what Infante represents, but also expose the deviant possibility that the *canción ranchera* is a music for queer bodies.

The *Nosotras las proles* version of "Vale más" is a stripped down adaptation, meant to emphasize the socio-political critique and homosexual overtones. This on-stage Luis Antonio sings live, accompanied by a single acoustic guitar rather than the guitar, strings and brass heard in the Fernández original. Therefore, it is easier for the audience to appreciate lyrics such as:

Olvidemos el pasado
Y lo que diga la gente
La verdad estoy bien guapo
Le voy bien al gabinete

Olvidemos el pasado
Y vivamos el presente
Lo que importa es mi bronceado
Y el peeling de mi frente

Vale más un buen galán

⁷⁹ As Mullholland explains, Guadalajara, and the state of Jalisco as a whole, "is reputed to be home to the authentic Mexican macho: the tequila-drinking, singing charro. Paradoxically, Guadalajara is known as being Mexico's 'gayest' city" (237).

⁸⁰ On Alejandro Fernández's sexuality see "Watch" 2013; "Alejandro" 2013; and "En exclusive" 2015.

Pa'secretario de estado⁸¹ (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 2 7-8)

Aside from the scant musical accompaniment, the idea of a stripped down performance is useful for considering two other elements of the scene. First, these lyrics critique the superficiality of those who hold important political positions, a kind of intellectual stripping citizens of proper representation. According to García Canclini, “Latin America’s recent history suggests that there are numerous situations in which societies accept the transubstantiation and prefer a political scene in which political heroes resemble those of film and television” (118). Applied to the Mexican context, it is easy to see how the intellectually inadequate, and yet physically attractive, Enrique Peña Nieto was elected the nation’s President. Wishing to see television and movie stars reflected in politicians, as the song implies, however, carries the risk of catastrophic political decisions. For example, the 2013 Luis Antonio sings, “Vale más estar mamey/ Pa’ defender lo privado,” referring to Peña Nieto’s plan to privatize Mexico’s petroleum production. In effect, the song critiques the recent efforts of the superficially interested elites to strip the nation of its constitutional rights and resources.

In a literal sense, the performance strips away the façade of heteronormative masculinity as the three cousins perform a striptease while Luis Antonio belts out the words. With Luis Antonio at center-stage, gesturing towards his exposed padded pectorals, Luis Manuel and José Luis are behind him, taking off their jackets, flexing their foam muscles and shaking their hips.

⁸¹ Original Lyrics:
 Olvidemos, el pasado
 Y lo que diga la gente
 La verdad es, que te amo
 Y me amas, Para siempre
 Olvidemos, el pasado
 Y vivamos, el presente
 Lo que importa es
 Que me amas,
 y te amo, para siempre

Vale mucho, un gran amor
 Que en el perdón ha crecido

Though these words and movements are an over-the-top display of masculinity, it is one that seems to compensate for something: the closeted homosexual masculinity associated with the *charro*, *rancheras* music, and *mexicanidad* more broadly. What makes this performance even more queer is the presence of a biological man and musician on stage. Yurief Nieves, the group's composer and musician is present throughout the entire performance, playing the guitar and singing back-up vocals. Though this Luis Antonio imitates a male vocal register and timbre, that "he" does not lip-sync or allow Nieves to sing lead is a conscious decision to challenge the "male only" attitude of the *ranchera* and *charro* world. Additionally, though reminiscent of masculine tones, because the voice belongs to a biologically female body, reveals a disorienting effect as the incongruities between the voice and appearance expose the artifice and theatricality of constructing the total package of *charro* masculinity.

Brown and Blackface Drag: Subverting Racial Tropes

Aside from dragging time and bodies, the 2013 *Nosotras las proles* production also drags the question of race and *mexicanidad* onto the stage, front and center. In order to think about the intersections between objects and their drag re-presentations, I rely on the many scholars who attest to the similarities of performing gendered and racial constructions. In her work, bell hooks draws a parallel between performances of blackness and gender transformation in the film, *Paris is Burning*, claiming that "cross-dressing, appearing in drag, transvestism, and transsexualism emerge in a context where the notion of subjectivity is challenged, where identity is always perceived as capable of construction, invention, change" (*Black looks* 145). In what he calls scripts, the "narratives that people can use in shaping their life plans and in telling their life stories," Anthony Appiah writes of gay and racial identities as being interrelated (160). He states, "the large collective identities that call for recognition come with notions of how a proper person

of that kind behaves: it is not that there is *one* way that gays or blacks should behave, but there are gay and black modes of behavior” (159). While Appiah does not consider the act of gendered drag in this statement, he asserts that gender, like race, carries with it particular performative expectations (151). Considering both hooks and Appiah, it is worth pointing out the way the black bodies are discussed in relation to homosexual male desire and male-to-female transformations.⁸² Though deeply interested in questions of race and identity, neither considers female homosexuality or female-to-male transformations as part of their analyses, which is central to my exploration of Las Reinas Chulas’ gender and racial transformations.

Forging a connection between gendered and racial drag requires an exploration of what Jack Halberstam refers to as non-performative masculinity. As he details, very little has been written about female-to-male acts of cross-dressing because masculinity is overwhelmingly accepted as natural (*Female* 238). Halberstam explains the ramifications of this acceptance is that “masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege” (2). As Sarah Murray asserts, studying female-to-male transitions is made even more complicated by the fact that this construction is often associated with female homosexuality. According to Murray, “lesbians are invisible because we withdraw from relationships with men. We are outside the system, while gay men are the worm inside” (344), suggesting that gay male cross-dressing is inherently more visible and accepted. Though Murray and Halberstam write about the United States, a parallel can be drawn to the Latin American context through the work of Lillian Manzor-Coats. As she explains, notions of

⁸² The film, *Paris is Burning*, is a seminal piece on New York’s drag ball scene in the 1980s. It features an intimate look at the world of gender performance, performed by primarily black bodies. Yet, the performers in the film, as well as the ball scene more broadly, are almost entirely male, performing interpretations of maleness and male-to-female impersonations.

femininity and masculinity are entrenched in power dynamics where men are considered as “active” and women as “passive.” As a result, “within this active/passive matrix that organizes Latin American gender constructs, the lesbian exists in a vacuum of unreadability and unnameability both socially and sexually. When she is named, she is euphemistically othered socially, but not sexually, by being put in the position of ‘one of the others’” (xxii). By means of naturalizing masculinity and absenting female homosexuality, what these scholars signal is the way societies force these women to exist as deviant outsiders.

Situating female homosexuals outside the margins of “acceptable” creates the potential for creating new models of not just gender, but also of the way race is represented. Being on margins, these female homosexual bodies are simultaneously part of and excluded from social experiences. Hence, according to Halberstam, the way in which these female bodies re-present and re-imagine masculinities gives them power via their “queer subject position that can successfully challenge hegemonic models of gender conformity” (*Female* 9). Perhaps, more importantly, this space on the margins “becomes the site of gender creativity” (Halberstam, *Female* 236), where the act of transformation does not need to adhere or conform to prevalent “masculine” scripts. This is particularly useful for thinking about how masculinity is connected to race. Kathryn Rosenfeld states, “proceeding from the premise that gender and race function intersectionally, so that where one is performed the other is also necessarily performed, I will claim that drag kings confound the power differentials embedded in these constructs by ‘becoming’ the powerful other in performance” (203). Both Halberstam and Rosenfeld signal that even in female-to-male cross-dressing, masculinity is often understood as a white, dominant masculinity. What this reveals is that despite having the possibility to create a new representation

of gender, most female-to-male constructions are informed by what Halberstam would call a hegemonic model of race.

In the piece, *Nosotras las proles*, Las Reinas Chulas uses drag as a mechanism for exposing and deviating from the stereotypes of gender and racial that the national cinema established as a baseline for *mexicanidad* and belonging. Re-presenting Pedro Infante's cinematic portrayals of *mexicanidad* and masculinity, Las Reinas Chulas expose how those portrayals are intimately related to race. As Pepe "El Toro," Infante is "el sinónimo de cada mexicano que carga con la ola de injusticias de un sistema político y social" (Amezcuca Castillo 71). As Luis Antonio García, "Pedro Infante quickly adopted the image of the charro, the heroic cowboy of the north, and specialized in *canciones rancheras*, the melodramatic ballads that fit the charro role" (Rubenstein "Bodies" 210). In both roles, Infante mediates the division between the lumpen, urban poor and the rural, macho *charro* by "slipping" between these two ways of life. More importantly, though, is that as the face of Mexico, Infante emphasizes being Mexican as synonymous with the light-skinned mestizo. In contrast to these light-skinned representations in *Tizoc* (1957) and *Angelitos negros* (1948), Infante becomes the mechanism through which Mexico's marginalized bodies see themselves reflected "a través del espejo."

Even though these two films can be heralded for pushing against the pervasive imagery of light-skinned *mestizaje*, as *el indio*, *Tizoc*, and José Carlos, the friend to many black bodies and father of a mulata child, Pedro Infante is part of a system that reinforces superficial and stereotypical interpretations of non-white bodies. For example, Joanne Herschfield's description of the *indigenista*⁸³ movement in which, "Indians in this 'national art' were portrayed as pure and

⁸³ As Joanne Hershfield explains, "if *mestizaje* was privileged by the state and *indigenismo* by the left-wing intelligentsia, then *hispanismo* was brought into the discussion through an alliance of right-wing landowning groups who opposed postrevolutionary land and social reforms" ("Race" 89). Despite its intentions to revitalize and valorize understandings of indigenous communities, as Hershfield points out, most critique the movement for the

simple, like children who had to be led to social (and revolutionary) consciousness by the intellectual mestizo elite” (“Race” 86), could be equally written about *Tizoc* (1957). By painting his face brown and by means of mimicry, Infante’s attempt to portray the indigenous character falls into the realm of caricature rather than revealing any human condition. In similar fashion, “in *Angelitos negros*, non-black people, literally painted black, play two of the central ‘black’ characters” (Hernández Cuevas 73), one of whom is Pedro Infante when he performs with black musicians. Infante’s blackface is a “racial masquerade” (Delgadillo 417) that is uncritical of minstrelsy and reinforces his character’s white privilege as he moves through society performing whichever race is more convenient. Hence, these tensions of masculinity and race within *mexicanidad* are crucial for my exploration of *Nosotras las proles* and *Las Reinas Chulas*’ turn away from these Golden Age cultural constructions. Specifically, by questioning masculinity, which itself is based on a tacit acceptance of the Mexican male as a whitened mestizo, *Nosotras las proles* simultaneously questions the state-sponsored erasure of indigenous and black bodies from the nation.

Las Reinas Chulas’ re-presentation of the film, *Tizoc* (1957) attempts to re-write both the original cinematic script and the racial script that indigenous bodies are supposed to perform. As Amezcua Castillo explains, “*Amor Indio* fue el nombre tentativo para la trama que llevaría como personaje principal a Tizoc, un indígena de nobles sentimientos que se enamora de una joven aristócrata al confundirla con la Virgen María” (148). Poor, but virtuous, Tizoc spends the entire film trying to impress María with his steadfast moral compass and small gifts, first, for having confused her with the Virgen Mary, and second, to win her love. Though María is often touched, being from a wealthy family and urban setting, she does not completely understand Tizoc’s

way that it “often failed to acknowledge linguistic, historical, and cultural differences or even variations in racial stock among the diverse groups that made up the indigenous groups” (“Race” 86).

intentions or the indigenous world she is surrounded by. Her father, Don Enrique, however, is staunchly opposed to the idea of any kind of relationship between them, let alone marriage; “ella es rica y tú indio, ella es rica y tú eres pobre. Es un imposible matrimonio” (*Tizoc*). As Monsiváis explains, “en *Tizoc*, Infante se expresa como niño, y como niño contrariado” (*Leyes* 233), which is often taken for weakness or a sign of lower intelligence. In fact, María’s father, realizing Tizoc’s steadfast desire to marry María, convinces him that he must abstain from having any contact with her for three months, after which, they may wed. Yet, Don Enrique has no intention of letting this “indio pobre” marry his white, aristocrat daughter. Rather, he has arranged for her to marry a former love interest and of her own race and socio-economic class.

Much like the *Los tres García* scene, the *Las Reinas Chulas* rendition of *Tizoc* is a remake of the end of the film when Tizoc kidnaps María upon learning about Don Enrique’s plan. Yet, this 2013 revision is a poignant critique of the greedy neoliberal system that is willing to destroy the nation’s natural resources and bodies in the name of financial gain. As the daughter of PEMEX leader, Romero Deschamps,⁸⁴ this María is the mouthpiece for prejudicial and demoralizing rhetoric, assuming Tizoc’s stupidity. Upon learning of the chapopotl⁸⁵ that surrounds them, she says, “¿Chapopotl en tus tierras? (*Aparte*) ¡Pero si ese es el oro que ando buscando! Ese es el problema de los indios, lo tienen en sus narices pero no saben que hacer con él” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 4 12). Convinced Tizoc is unable to comprehend something as complex as fossil fuels, this María draws him the love story of two dinosaurs: one whose bones have turned into chapopotl, and the political one (the PRI), that wants to turn the chapopotl into black gold. Refusing to believe the story, Tizoc gives María a lesson in strategic business practices, “Mire mi niña ese negocio del chapopotl ya no es tan bueno, hay que buscar energías

⁸⁴ For more information see Montalvo 2012; Pérez Albarrán 2012.

⁸⁵ Chapopotl is the indigenous word for fossil fuel. It can sometimes also be spelled as Chapopote. See Borja 2008.

renovables y jugar con la ley de oferta y la demanda pa'hacer negocio...Indio Tizoc no es menso" (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 4 13). Not only is this Tizoc not stupid, it is he who comes out alive, as protector of nationhood, as this 2013 María is killed by her greedy father.

Another striking similarity between the original film and this updated revision is the visual representation of the indigenous body via brownface. As Sergio de la Mora explains, *Tizoc* "is the only film in which Infante played an Indian, doing so in brown-face and completely stereotyped as childlike and superstitious" (86). However, there is very little scholarship on the film, let alone critical engagement that problematizes this act of racial drag. I suggest this is because those who consider the film do so as part of hagiographic biographies of Infante's life and situate the use of brownface within Infante's intentions to depict indigenous life as accurately as possible.⁸⁶ In contrast, the 2013 version utilizes the speech patterns and brownface in a subversive and critical way. Rather than studying indigenous bodies, like Infante did, this *Tizoc* is a product of studying Infante's portrayal. Hence, the on-stage version is a layered performance of race: a non-indigenous actor re-enacting another non-indigenous actor's brownface interpretation of real-life indigenous bodies. The *Reina Chula* re-presenting *Tizoc* drags onto her body Pedro Infante's racial construction of an indigenous man, creating a doubly constructed image of indigeneity. As such, the piece's use of brownface is a mechanism for critiquing the monolithic model of light-skinned *mestizo* identity as just another construction. This re-make also embodies the broader observation that if this identity was constructed over half a century ago, it can just as easily be reconstructed in the present, making room for these racially marginalized Others.

⁸⁶ According to Vallejo Sánchez, "cuando la filmación de 'Tizoc', Pedro observó durante días la manera de caminar de los mayas; de hecho, el suegro del chofer de don 'Rup', era un maya auténtico y le enseñó al actor cómo hablaban, caminaba y se cortaban el pelo los mayas" (26).

Though I have already summarized much of the plotline of *Angelitos negros* earlier in this chapter, my focus here is its relation to race. As de la Mora states, “along with *Tizoc*, Infante’s only other race melodrama is *Angelitos negros* (Black angels, Joselito Rodríguez, 1948), in which Infante’s haughty and racist blonde wife, Ana Luisa is shocked and horrified when she gives birth to a *mulata*, whom she rejects” (86). After several years, tears and arguments, the on-screen Ana Luisa eventually accepts her daughter. Joanne Herschfield suggests this moment of acceptance “exemplifies how film melodrama is able to accommodate cultural uncertainties surrounding issues of race in ways that fit within the limits of proscribed social attitudes and beliefs” (“Race” 96). These social attitudes and beliefs, according to the cinematic narrative, would be that over time, the nation would be able to accept their dark-skinned inhabitants, though they will always have the stigma of being racial Others. For these racial Others to fit within the melodramatic paradigm, and more broadly the social structures of the nation, they must adhere to certain scripts. Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas explains, the dark-skinned characters must belong to certain categories like “victimized servants, innocent children, or resigned friends” (76). Moreover, the characters, like the young Belén, must demonstrate they are “capable of unquestioning love and friendship for the ‘white’ characters” (76).

Las Reinas Chulas do not re-present an actual scene from the original *Angelitos negros* (1948), but explore the dynamic between the mulata Belén and her racist mother, Ana Luisa, where the film leaves off. What is abundantly clear from the beginning of the scene is Las Reinas Chulas’ critique of melodramatic resolution. Unlike the racial melodrama that happily resolves itself, this version calls attention to the Afro-Mexicans and other afro-heritage citizens that are still excluded from the rights and protection they deserve. This comes through in the performance as the father figure who accepted his mulata daughter is absent. With comments

such as “Ya te dije que no me digas mamacita” or “Hubiera preferido parir un pollo rostizado que una hija negra como tú” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 3 9), this on-stage mother is quite frank about her rejection and racial prejudice. This is further accentuated by the script itself, referring to Ana Luisa by the actresses real name, Emilia, collapsing the space between fictional prejudice and off-screen reality. In contrast, the screen-story Belén is referred to in the script as “Negrita,” calling attention to the dehumanizing quality of the insults and the real, lived experience of many dark-skinned bodies in Mexico. Moreover, this on-stage version of Ana Luisa adds insult to injury by preying upon the young girl’s innocence and vulnerability. Telling her daughter, “Porque te odio, odio tu color, tu pelo, tu raza raza de esclavos, deberían seguir encadenados” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 3 10) or calling her “cerebritito de chango,” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 3 9), these venomous insults make the racial hierarchy among them excruciatingly clear.

By demoralizing her, this Negrita body is seen as expendable. The following conversation highlights Negrita/Belén’s vulnerability:

NEGRITA: Mamita, ¿por qué me quieres vender?

EMILIA: Ya te dije que no te voy a vender carboncito, tan sólo es una alianza estratégica, vamos...una reforma, una liberalización, un riesgo compartido, una sociedad de mutua convivencia.

NEGRITA: Eso me dijiste la vez pasada que me mandaste con el otro señor. Y hasta me dijiste que me ibas a comprar un vestido nuevo, ¿qué pasó, te gastaste el dinero? (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 3 9)

This rhetoric is simultaneously humorous in its critique of the pervasiveness of neoliberal speak and devastatingly heartbreaking. By taking the melodramatic plot of the original 1948 film and reworking it, this *Las Reinas Chulas* version deviates from and subverts the notion that everything will work out: blacks and whites will live in harmony. Rather, this mother’s sale of

and profit from her own daughter's labor (presumably sexual labor), is a reflection upon the way things have yet to resolve themselves for black bodies.

Like the *Tizoc* scene, *Las Reinas Chulas* racially drag their bodies, performing this 2013 version of *Angelitos negros* in blackface. Additionally, the scene's use of blackface is a double performance of the racial drag: *Las Reinas Chulas* drag onto their bodies characters from the original film that painted themselves in order to perform an Other. As Hernández Cuevas explains, "non-black people, literally painted black, play two of the central 'black' characters" (73). These two central figures were José Carlos, appearing only once in blackface during a musical performance and the other is Belén. Since José Carlos is absent from this 2013 adaptation, only Belén/Negrita appears on-stage in racial drag; she wears all white to call attention to her darkened face, hands, legs and afro wig. In contrast, the re-make of *Ana Luisa*, whose light-skinned features and blonde hair are made even more noticeable, juxtaposed by her black gown, black pumps and fur stole. The effect of this costuming is that it visually makes the power dynamics of victim and victimizer black and white. Moreover, this visual element channels *Las Reinas Chulas*' critique of the way racial binaries have been performed and repeated to the point of becoming naturalized constructions. In large part, this is due to the pervasive and influential nature of Golden Age classics, like *Angelitos negros* (1948), whose attempt at racial inclusion actually emphasized racial exclusion and abuses. As such, their racial drag is a performance of disidentifying with and subverting narratives of difference.

Beyond *Ana Luisa/Emilia*'s verbal abuse, which also alludes to diegetic physical abuse, this black body performs tropical exoticism associated with this racial Other. Hernández Cuevas states, in the film "blacks are exotic, purely musical and passionate beings from a tropical paradigm" (76). This is exemplified by the way José Carlos used blackface as part of a musical

performance in which he was accompanied by presumably “authentic” Afro-Mexican and Afro-Cuban musicians and dancers. Though José Carlos is absent from this 2013 production, *Las Reinas Chulas* pass his performative appropriation of race onto the on-stage Belén/Negrta. At the end of the scene, she begins to sing and is joined by the other *Reinas Chulas* as musical accompaniment. Also in blackface and wearing afro wigs, these “black” bodies are dressed in the stereotypical cinematic image of dark-skinned musicians, wearing form fitting white pants and white tops with colorful ruffles along the shoulders and down the sleeves. Yet, the song Belén/Negrta and her “black” musicians perform is not a “tropical” one, but a Latin American protest song about race. They perform “Duerme Duerme Negrito,” made popular during the *Nueva Canción* movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and more specifically, by singer Mercedes Sosa.⁸⁷ Chronologically impossible, this song was not part of the original film. However, as Theresa Delgadillo argues, the original film included a song adapted from the 1940s racial protest poem, “Píntame angelitos negros,” by Venezuelan Andrés Eloy Blanco (407).⁸⁸ Included in this Golden Age film, the song “attests to a dialogue about race” both within Mexico as well as “conducted through transnational routes of commodity production and exchange” (Delgadillo 407). *Las Reinas Chulas*, then, also perform this sense of “transnational” conversations about race by sonically dragging Argentine Sosa’s work to this contemporary Mexican stage.

This connection between protest songs and transnational racial considerations is enriched by the fact that in the film, the black Nana sings a bedtime song that shares similarities with “Duerme Duerme Negrito.” In the film, Nana sings, “Belén, Belén, porque tienes tu los ojos así,/ despabilao/ Belén/ Si parece que te han jichao/ ajiguagua/ Belén...Belén/ tu mamai está cansao y

⁸⁷ For more on the *Nueva Canción* movement and Sosa, see Bahamón Serrano, 162; Holston, 2010; Neustadt, 2004.

⁸⁸ From the poem, José Carlos sings to Belén, “Aunque la Virgen sea blanca/píntame angelitos negros/que también se van al cielo/todos los negritos buenos. Pinto si pintas con amor/por qué desprecias su color/si sabes que en el cielo/también los quiere Dios.”

se va/ si tu no drume Belén” (*Angelitos negros*). The repetition of “drume,” in place of “duerme,” other not-quite Castillian words and references to blackness are linguistic means of remembering of an African past. In this sense, Las Reinas Chulas engage in a transnational conversation about race by combining the sentiments behind Nana’s bedtime song with Sosa’s “Duerme Duerme Negrito.” Furthermore, by replacing the screen story songs with Sosa’s protest song, this 2013 performance is an example turning away from the cinematic object, deviating in such a way that this new version is a subversive commentary on continuing racial divisions.

In the song, just as Sosa sang, this Belén/Negrita and her “negrito” musicians sing:

Duerme, duerme, negrito
Que tu mama está en el campo, negrito

Duerme, duerme, mobila
Que tu mama está en el campo, mobila

Te va a traer codornices
Para ti.
Te va a traer rica fruta
Para ti
Te va a traer carne de cerdo
Para ti.
Te va a traer muchas cosas
Para ti.

Y si el negro no se duerme
Viene el diablo blanco
Y zas le come la patita
Chacapumba, chacapumba, apumba, chacapumba.

What makes this 2013 version a queer interpretation of this song, beyond the subversive blackface, is that these performers change the sentiment of the words through visual and vocal means. In Sosa’s version,⁸⁹ the most well known, her voice is accompanied by only an acoustic guitar and a drum that Sosa herself plays. Maintaining the limited instrumentation and the moderately upbeat rhythmic quality of the song, this on-stage rendition diverges from Sosa’s

⁸⁹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKgEBBUI6U4>

vocals. At the beginning, this Belén/Negrita simulates Sosa's deep and emotive quality, but as the song progresses, she also incorporates Nana's guttural and throaty sound. Blending the two voices functions to also collapse the temporal and regional gaps between the two songs, emphasizing their united mission: draw attention to the experiences and presence of Afro-Latin American bodies. Visually, the performance also differs from both the screen-story song and Sosa's performance style as Belén/Negrita and her musicians dance. Following one another around in a circle, while moving their arms from side to side, they perform a kind of conga-line as they sing. Through these movements, the performers invoke the tropic qualities associated and expected of black bodies, juxtaposed, however, by these lyrics that point to the physical labor and abuse the black body suffers in the Latin American context. Hence, this re-working is a means of disidentifying with the screen-story of the past, transforming the black body as object into one that is aware of how to subvert and critique the exclusive racial constructions and scripts that continue to define *mexicanidad*.

Audience Reaction

Performing *Nosotras las proles* in the center of Coyoacán rather than their home theatre space, *El Vicio*, risked audience confusion about the kind of performance that they were about to see. Being outside of a traditional theatre space also means greater variety in audience composition and variability in sound quality and technical capabilities, to name a few ramifications. Although *El Vicio* is not a traditional theatre space, as it is also a bar and restaurant, it does separate the actors from the audience by means of a raised stage, backstage areas and wings where actors wait to enter, hidden from audience view. While the Coyoacán stage did maintain separation between Las Reinas Chulas and their spectators, some of the privacy of a theatre space and protection from intrusions like uninterested passerbys and weather

were forfeited. Though many of the spectators at the 2013 event were there to see this Las Reinas Chulas *teatro-cabaret* piece, there were undoubtedly people who stumbled upon the performance while meandering around Coyoacán that summer afternoon. However, any unsuspecting audience members would have been quickly clued in to the fact they they were about to see a theatre performance. One of the first clues was the posters, lining the sides and front of the tent, that promoted the XI Festival Internacional de Cabaret. The organization of chairs in orderly lines in front of a raised stage and the lighting and technological equipment also functioned to signal the formality of the performance. If this were not enough, the introduction to the piece made by a drag queen version of Mexico's First Lady, "La Gaviota," should have signaled that this particular theatre production was going to be interesting. Between the on-stage "Gaviota" and the very title of the piece, *Nosotras las proles*, the audience members likely picked up on the satirical style and content that characterizes Las Reinas Chulas' *teatro-cabaret*.

From the moment Las Reinas Chulas stepped on the stage, the piece was explicitly self-referential and aware of being a performance. As part of introducing the work, the actors made comments like "y eso se llama cultura" or "la cultura se paga con sus impuestos." These statements reference the way Mexican citizens pay taxes so that free cultural productions, like the one the audience was about to watch, can be held in spaces like Coyoacán's center plaza. Between the drag Gaviota and the title's reference to the insults made by Peña Nieto's daughter, the actors also made it clear that this cultural production was critical of the nation's government. Moreover, the projections of iconic cinematic images like the *Nosotros los pobres* neighborhood or the Abuela's house from *Los tres García*, were supplemental and integral to the live stage actions. Not only did these images trigger the spectator's memories of Golden Age classics and signal which film was about to be re-presented, but the actors were also keenly aware of these

images. As they move around the stage, the Las Reinas Chulas placed themselves in ways that metaphorically collapsed the space between the cinematic image and the on-stage production. More than being strategically planned movements, the effect of the actors' interaction with the projections was that they prompted the audience to realize just how engaged the performers were with their surroundings.

This engagement is appreciated via “la relación directa con el espectador a través de la ruptura de la cuarta pared,” that as Alzate describes, are characteristic elements of Las Reinas Chulas' work (“Fiesten” 72). These moments of rupture are notable when the characters address the audience directly like when Chachita asks her audience why the poor suffer or when María turns to the audience to insult indigenous people. This direct communication also happens before both Luis Antonio and Belén/Negrita begin to sing; they square their bodies and gazes towards the audience, directing their sonic performance at them. Compounding this direct communication are the moments of improvisation. In the 2013 performance, this improvisation included bringing an audience member on-stage. Between the first scene, the re-make of *Nosotros los pobres*, and the transition to *Los tres García*, the Abuela did not just simply “pasa de la paralítica a Sara García” (*Nosotras las proles* Scene 2 4), as the script details. Rather, this Abuela pointed to a gentleman in the audience and gestured for him to come on stage. Once there, she kept pointing to her cheek and the audience began to chant “beso” repeatedly. Though visibly uncomfortable, the gentleman had no other option than to kiss the Abuela before she would let him go back to his seat and complete the scene change. Hence, Las Reinas Chulas go beyond breaking the fourth wall by addressing their audience to actively including them in the performance, extending the performance space beyond the confines of the stage.

Whether originally a knowing attendee or an unsuspecting passerby, the crowd at this 2013 performance was overwhelmingly responsive to the performance. Specifically, they revealed their engagement with and enjoyment of the piece through laughter. In large part, this reaction is due to the humor Las Reinas Chulas use, even in their critique of unsettling social issues like femicide and racial exploitation. For example, as Chorreada lists the painful realities of the Mexican experience, by following each with a calm and collected, “Resignación,” causes the audience to laugh, rather than respond with sadness, silence or gasps. Moreover, during the last scene of the play, as Las Reinas Chulas confused cinematic deaths from *Nosotros los pobres* and *Ustedes los ricos*, the audience roars with laughter, revealing their appreciation of this revision. The audience had a similar reaction during each of Las Reinas Chulas’ musical performances, especially their re-writing of “Ni hablar mujer” and “Vale más.” Though likely expecting the original versions, the audience laughter and clapping points to amusement with the more critically engaged lyrical renditions. Finally, the instances of homosexual overtones, such as the fight scene between Los 3 García or references to Pedro Infante as gay, did not seem to offend this audience; no one shouted obscenities or got up and left. Rather, all that I could see and hear indicated that the spectators found these moments humorous. Ultimately, this audience of approximately 200 people, a mixture of men, women and children, overwhelmingly responded positively to the work of Las Reinas Chulas, reflecting not just an appreciation of the content, but also of the kind of socio-critical *teatro-cabaret* the four women create.

Conclusion

Dragging several Golden Age Cinema classics onto the stage and onto their bodies, *Nosotras las proles* is a rich and complex work that re-writes the characters and scenarios that have come to define *mexicanidad*. What makes this work even more compelling is the way it

reveals the innerworkings of how Las Reinas Chulas' oppositional gaze became an act of disidentifying with the past. At the heart of this performance of disidentification there is more than just an effort to destabilize and dismantle the master narratives that define the nation; at the heart of this performance resides an intention to queer and subvert the past. To achieve this, in part, the women of Las Reinas Chulas looked to the tools of *carpa* and *revista*, transporting political satire, sketch-based organization and gender bending to the contemporary stage. Moreover, the women selected various cinematic moments and extracted them from their original contexts to re-present them in this 2013 International Festival of Cabaret performance. In this sense, much like an end table or lamp, Las Reinas Chulas' work moves films, characters and plots, as if they too were everyday objects. Hence, by looking to the past and recontextualizing films, *Nosotras las proles* embodies the idea that both time and objects have the ability to bind bodies together. Moreover, the revised interpretations of cinema classics signal the way these women are not disorienting the past, but reorienting it towards a more inclusionary future vision of *mexicanidad*, one that accepts racial and queer Others. As such, *Nosotras las proles'* path towards a new vision is expressed via drag as a means of re-organizing time, re-presenting genders, re-defining the family unit and re-constructing racial identities.

Concluding Remarks: The Show Must Go On

Once upon a time there was a place where powerful drug lords used underground tunnels and helicopters to vanish into thin air,⁹⁰ the only thing most people knew about the First Lady was that she was a soap opera star⁹¹ and the President used social media to inform the world of important events like putting on his socks.⁹² But do not be fooled by this almost humorous list; there was a dark and tragic side to this place. The search for the bodies of 43 student protestors that went “missing” uncovered over 60 mass gravesites,⁹³ journalists were regularly threatened, tortured and murdered⁹⁴ and a government commissioned “peace exhibit” displayed only images of brutalized bodies.⁹⁵ It is tempting to believe that a place like this could never really exist. And yet, it does. It is Mexico.

My description may seem hyperbolic, but it is not. More than ever, the grotesque, violent and surreal events in Mexico epitomize Jesusa Rodríguez’s observation that “we’re in a kind of perverse fiction” (Obejas 8). This grim reality has also so profoundly changed modern Mexico that it longer matches the narratives of *mexicanidad* once proliferated by Golden Age Cinema. The idyllic macho, yet sentimental Pedro Infante, exotic and tropical dancing women, rural landscapes and family ties of *charro* life and musical styles that speak to the hearts of Mexicans bear little resemblance to the sounds and characters projected on the big- and small-screen. With television shows like *La Reina del Sur*, *Mafia dolls* and *El Cartel* (I and II),⁹⁶ the increasingly

⁹⁰ See Cacho “Túnel” 2015; “La Fuga de ‘El Chapo’” 2015.

⁹¹ See Cheung 2012.

⁹² See Macias 2015.

⁹³ See Baddock 2015; “Buscan ampliar mission” 2015.

⁹⁴ See Aguilar 2015; “Mexican Photojournalist Found Dead” 2015; “They Come for Those Who Are Not Mouthpieces” 2015.

⁹⁵ See Mayorga 2015.

⁹⁶ See “Top 10 Narconovelas” 2013.

popular *narcocorrido* musical style⁹⁷ and *narcoliteratura*, this Mexico is developing a vastly different version of *mexicanidad*.

If there is any redeeming value in this new set of expectations associated with being Mexican, it is that a change in the status quo is possible. The artists in this dissertation also demonstrate this possibility, though Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas' revised visual, linguistic and sonic articulations of what it means to be Mexican are a far cry from those associated with the growingly pervasive *narcocultura*. Rather, cabaret is the mechanism they use to push against and reject the exclusionary definitions of the past. Operating from inside and outside the margins of popular cultural productions, these artists perform queer acts of subversion that reveal their personal opposition and disidentification with the expectations firmly established by Golden Age Cinema. Through their efforts to drag time, sound and gender, they unsettle, destabilize and subvert the heteronormative sexuality, the whitened mestizo and male/female binaries that have defined *mexicanidad* for more than half a century. Ultimately, through cabaret, these artists enact alternative understandings that are more inclusive and tolerant of the diversity within the nation's borders.

The live and recorded performances of Tongolele, Tito Vasconcelos and Las Reinas Chulas have reached large audiences throughout Mexico City and the nation more broadly, although their efforts to spread their visions of being Mexican are no match for mainstream productions. Yet, proving their effectiveness was never my aim. Rather, the goal of this dissertation has been to highlight the subversive potential that resides within cabaret, as embodied and enacted by these particular artists. Connecting early *carpa* and *revista* theatre to Tongolele's 1940s performances to Vasconcelos' transvestite theatre beginning in the 1970s to

⁹⁷ See Baker 2014; Simonette 2001.

Las Reinas Chulas' contemporary *teatro-cabaret* productions, I map a genealogy of cabaret performance. At stake in this effort is that it reveals cabaret did not simply disappear with the rise of radio and film, but like its performers, has taken many different forms and occupied many stages over the last century.

Into the 21st century, Mexican cabaret is flourishing. This in large part due to the efforts of Las Reinas Chulas and their International Festival of Cabaret, held annually in Mexico City. Unable to attend since 2013, I have, however, enthusiastically followed the blog posts and calendar of events. Now celebrating 13 years, the 2015 cycle has sought to bring over 39 cabaret performances to those throughout Mexico City. In an interview, Marisol Gasé and Astrid Hadad stated that the festival's goal was to "hablar de crítica social, hablar de crítica política, de canciones, todo es con humor," but also that they wanted to "sacar la carpa a las calles," bringing cabaret to the people ("Crítica política"). The parallel these two cabareteras draw between the past and present is a conscious one. Not only does the festival itself receive little to no funding, but the organizers are also cognizant of the fact many Mexicans lack the economic resources to otherwise see performances. Hence, dragging the early *capra* theatre style into 2015, this festival has modern-day cabaret being performed under travelling tents all over the capital city, regardless of how seasoned the artists are (i.e. Hadad). At the heart of this event, and motivating today's cabareter@s to keep cabaret alive, is the hope that their productions stimulate awareness in their audiences, "y eso es lo importante del cabaret" ("Crítica política").

Demonstrative of this drive, the festival's lineup grows more impressive with each passing year. What struck me about the 2015 event, though, was the long list of Mexican groups in contrast to the numerous Spanish and Latin American cabaret performers of years past. I believe the growing number of Mexican-based cabaret groups has much to do with the sense of

crisis and need to find solace in art. Rodríguez's statement from many years ago, "we're in such a profound crisis, and cabaret always flourishes in crisis" (Obejas 8), seems particularly fitting. I also suggest the sense of urgency for cabaret to challenge Mexico's current state of affairs also has much to do with the recent murders of activists and journalist, such as Rubén Espinosa. Just after Espinosa's death, Ana Francis Mor shared a story on Facebook written by Lydia Cacho. The article is a somber account of the Cacho's communication with Espinosa about his fear and forced departure from his home state of Veracruz due to threats on his life.

There is much at stake in Espinosa's death that is outside the scope of this dissertation and conclusion. I bring it up, however, because "Espinosa's killing has raised tension among reporters who long have considered Mexico's capital to be a refuge from media intimidation and violence elsewhere in Mexico" (*The Guardian* 2015). All of the artists in this dissertation live in Mexico City, and now that the capital is no longer perceived as safe for outspoken bodies, their work is all the more important. Each time Las Reinas Chulas, Tito Vasconcelos and numerous other contemporary cabaret artists take the stage, their biting critiques of the nation's government and socio-political atmosphere could mean risking their own safety. Yet, the show must go on. By continuing to perform their acts of subversion, they simultaneously perform acts of bravery. Their interpretations of the nation's past, political figures and cinematic classics considered here are not just thought provoking, but give hope that envisioning a new *mexicanidad* is still possible and, especially in light of recent events, embody the declaration: "no se mata la verdad" (Cacho "No se mata" 2015).

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