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Sácala (del closet): Unapologetic Queer Sexualities in Mexican and Latinx Melodrama

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by

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Y mi hermana Rebecca,  
Por su apoyo y fe incondicional.*

*Para lxs que han encontrado el valor de aceptarse diferente  
Y lxs que están en proceso.*

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

*Sácala (del closet): Unapologetic Queer Sexualities in Mexican and Latinx Melodrama*

by

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Spanish, Graduate Program in Spanish  
University of California, Riverside, September 2020  
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This dissertation aims to actively approach melodramatic Latinx/Mexican productions as cultural manifestations of a political movement that not only pushes the proverbial envelope towards post-queer-identity (that is post the coming out climax of many works) by demanding the recognition of explicit queer sexuality as a powerful tool that can and does invoke change in the cultural and social realm. *Sácala (del closet)* theorizes what I am calling unapologetic raw queer sexualities, which I see manifested in Latin American and Latinx cultural productions. I pay close attention to the transnational connections and influences not only between the neighboring countries of México and the US but also in global conversations with sexual identities in Latin America. The works I engage in my dissertations include the 1983 novel titled *Melodrama* by Luis Zapata. I suggest that *Melodrama* is both an homage and a parody of the melodramatic genre in Mexican Golden Age cinema and how the novel ultimately destabilizes fixed notions of gender and sexuality

that impact both straight and queer understandings of body, identity, and desire. In Chapter 2, I work with performances by El Mariachi Arcoris de Los Angeles by analyzing the different ways in which the queer mariachi queers spaces and dares to reimagine what it means to be queer and what it means to unsettle patriarchal, heteronormative frameworks that are historically associated not only with Latinx culture and Chicana activism but indeed socially pervasive across the different ethnic groups that make up the United States of America. The following chapter analyzes Netflix's *La casa de las flores* (2018), an original series entangled with Mexican melodrama, particularly stemming from telenovelas, that relate directly to queer world making issues as I pay attention to US notions of sexual identities that are appropriated by non-US subjects as well as the different forms in which these subjectivities exceed theoretical imagining of transnational queer (re)formation with a visibly queer sexuality. Lastly, I analyze *Tangerine* as an audiovisual project which allows the viewer to experience -with limitations- sexual otherness while questioning notions of Latinx family.

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*Mi hombría es aceptarme diferente  
Ser cobarde es mucho más duro  
yo no pongo la otra mejilla  
Pongo el culo compañero.*  
-Pedro Lemebel (Manifiesto “Hablo por mi diferencia”)

### **Intro – Quings and Kweens and Everyone in Betwinks**

It is time to level your pussy up! This drag queen slang expression, linked to video game terminology implies that as queer people -at the individual level- we have gained enough experience (after coming out, for example) and that it is time to reach the next level – help others who are still becoming, changing, challenging, morphing, learning their identities. According to the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Program (as of August 2017) “more LGBT people have been killed in what advocacy groups categorize as hate-violence-related homicides so far in 2017 than in all of 2016”, this of course counting the Orlando shooting of June 2016 as one incident (encompassing many lives). Violence towards queer subjects<sup>1</sup> stems for many reasons; among those causes are the miseducation of many individuals in our current society. Violence often is replicated in many cultural productions regarding LGBTQ+ issues. Academically, “leveling up your pussy” implies fighting to show the limits of 'queer theory' in order to keep expanding our/their academic knowledge with tangible daily queer lives and take a more 'hands-on' approach to queer academia.

As a response to the focus on suffering and violence in much of queer news, literature, and cinema, this dissertation engages with *queer visibility* in both Mexican and

<sup>1</sup> I will be making use of the word queer to describe subjects as non-heterosexual who do not subscribe to heteronormativity. If my usage of the word queer changes meaning, I will clarify. In addition, I use the word queer as an umbrella term for ease of reading but will engage in the politics of the word when needed for clarification.

Latinx melodramatic productions. As such, *ser visiblemente queer/cuir es elegir tu FELICIDAD sobre tu seguridad* for queerphobia can be around the proverbial corner. A *felicidad* that challenges the mostly negative representations of queer life. This dissertation addresses the following questions: How are the politics of an ‘out’ subject/cuerpa different from those passing as straight? What differences or politics affect the person when their gender performance is always read as queer? More importantly, what are these openly and visibly queer bodies doing to change queer politics both theoretically and in the streets?

It is important to note that my usage of *visibility* is a double bind term. On the one hand, visibility, thought of as in *la experiencia encarnada*, is important within the communi-*ties* since queerness is fluid, capacious, and pluralistic. This form of visibility, in whatever shape and form it may come, can thrive when exposed to other forms of queer embodiments by emulating and gestating new ways of being. As queers, we need to acknowledge and not forget to understand the variety of bodies/shapes/colors of the human body/experience in order to avoid the creation of a ‘unified queer’ identity. Thus, I style community as *communities* because, as queers, we form ties to several groups both within and outside the queer world. Queerness is not just the homonormative cisgender body that often surfaces in queer theory analysis. There are many ways one can be queer. On the other hand, whereas the first strand of visibility informs the queer *communities* by engaging primarily with the body/experience to enlighten, educate and create consciousness of the plethora of existing queer *communities*, the second form of visibility is in the abstract political sense. This form of visibility is a direct critique of current

LGBTQ+ politics which puts the community majority's need over the individual's need. Politics that focuses on gay rights, marriage and gays in the military. Although essential issues, it narrows the political potential of queer communities and somatic understandings of sex and gender. As much as there is a need for the queer communities to understand each other, there is a need for this same type of visibility for Lawful inclusion into the social, political system that too often dehumanizes and enables violence towards queer subjects. Unapologetic raw queer sexuality is the type of Visibility needed to expand the current politics on sexual citizenship where all bodies and subjects matter. Most importantly, these types of sexualities demonstrate hope, vitality, life, the existence of the idea that one can be queer and proud, reminding that life exists outside the confinements of the closet or homonormativity. Examples of this visibility are found in the literary, performative and cinematic text I will be analyzing in the following chapters which include: *Melodrama* (1983) by Luis Zapata, performances by Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles, the Netflix Original *La casa de las flores* (Dir. Manolo Caro, 2018) and the film *Tangerine* (dir. Sean Baker, 2015). These multimedia cultural productions beg to ask: How is queer kinship reconfigured and restructured to make visible communi-ties? How do they resist the confinement to established melodramatic narratives about queerness?

This dissertation aims to actively approach melodramatic Latinx/Mexican productions as cultural manifestations of a political movement that not only pushes the proverbial envelope towards post-queer-identity (that is, post the 'coming out' climax of many works), by demanding the recognition of explicit queer sexuality as a powerful tool that can and does invoke change in the cultural and social realm. Take for example Pedro

Lemebel's performance known as the "Manifiesto (Hablo por mi diferencia)," performed as a leftist political act of intervention in September 1986, in Santiago, Chile, where he denounces the violence towards queers, especially effeminate ones and demands an opportunity for queers to be given the same opportunities as a heteronormative subject:

"No soy un marica disfrazado de poeta / No necesito disfraz / *Aquí está mi cara / Hablo por mi diferencia / (...)* Mi hombría fue morderme las burlas/ Comer rabia para no matar a todo el mundo/ *Mi hombría es aceptarme diferente/ Ser cobarde es mucho más duro/ Yo no pongo la otra mejilla / Pongo el culo compañero/ Y esa es mi venganza / Mi hombría espera paciente(...)/ ¿No habrá un maricón en alguna esquina desequilibrando el futuro de su hombre nuevo? / (...)* Hay tantos niños que van a nacer/ con una alita rota/ Y yo *quiero que vuelen compañero/ que su revolución/ Les de un pedazo de cielo rojo / Para que puedan volar.*" (My emphasis).

In this case, Lemebel's queerness, *su hombría*, is subject-ed by the political militancy of the time, a patriarchal dictatorship. Lemebel explicitly faces the political discourse of the Chilean dictatorship (*No necesito disfraz/ Aquí está mi cara*) choosing to not hide but contest, face to face, the government that has pretended to have morals (*Por corromper su moral revolucionaria*). Lemebel manages to question the government's political agenda (*¿No habrá un maricón...desequilibrando el futuro de su hombre nuevo?*) by emphasizing his *queerness* and his *body*, he breaks the sexual taboo, specifically by politicizing the *anus* (*Pongo el culo compañero*). In this case, precisely in the sexualization of the queer cismale body. The anus becomes a political weapon against the Chilean dictatorship since the anus is a danger. This dissident body provides the possibility to subvert the mechanisms of patriarchal domination, in Lemebel's case, his intervention cuts both the dictatorship and the socialist-marxist Left. Anusthing is possible when the queer body emerges as a POWERFUL and defiant potentiality capable

of resisting the repression of 'dissident sexualities.' Lemebel demands, with/in his queerness and challenging attitude, a revolution that ALSO benefits those who are born *con una alita rota*, a (political) future which accounts for the queer subject the greater nation (re)building.

Thus, I found inspiration in the writing and pride of the Chilean Pedro Lemebel to seek positive affectivity, subjects that I label as *unapologetic and raw queer sexualities*. The subjects and bodies I choose to work in this dissertation have, what I am calling, unapologetic raw queer sexualities. They are subjects who are not hidden; there is no need to 'read between the lines' (like Sifuentes) nor 'reading silences' (like Sedwick) nor reading against the grain. These unapologetic raw queer sexualities and bodies are here, in your face, dialoguing with heteronormativity even if it implies a negative reception. The most critical action is precisely the visibility these bodies create. There is an urgent need to proliferate readings of explicit sexualities (and acts). What are these explicitly unapologetic raw queer sexualities doing to current queer politics? How are they questioning the effects of sexual identities in Latin American, specifically Mexican, and Latinx cultural productions? How are these explicit queer sexualities being (re)presented, and to what extent?

### ***Historicizing the theoretical background***

The monumental statement of accepting oneself different, just like Lemebel's inspiring epigraph, and declaring one's queerness disrupts the silences that often occur in queer theory and *daily life*. Many works on queer (often masculine) subjectivities, post-1990, focus on the 'secret,' the 'unsaid,' the same-sex 'friendships,' the reading of the

'silences. In *Cinemachismo* Sergio de la Mora analyzes Mexican Golden Age melodramas, introducing homosexuality and homoeroticism as something that needs to be read between the lines, drawing attention to queer viewing through “dis-identification” (Muñoz). De la Mora’s work also explores representations of masculinity (whether heterosexual or not) to destabilize, denaturalize and defamiliarize the institutions and practices that make gender. By questioning the Mexican Revolution’s patriarchal discourse, de la Mora demonstrates that homosexuality has always been part of the macho image presented in cinema. In his analysis of the 'buddy comedy', he notices homoerotic tendencies disguised as 'compadrismo.' According to the author, this 'compadrismo' questions three things primarily: a crisis in Mexican patriarchy, a 'macho' identity, and a crisis in the film industry. De la Mora analyses the actor Pedro Infante, as the "maximum embodiment of Mexican masculinity and the archetype of the working-class heterosexual male" (pg. 15), while also noting, the silences, ambiguities, and tensions that arise in some of his in-film-buddies. De la Mora argues that in Infante’s film, the male buddies have a homoerotic tension disguised/resolved in the creation of an erotic triangle with the addition of a woman -which functions as a negotiating medium between the males. This idea of 'male homosocial desire,' of course, is reappropriated by De la Mora from Sedgwick’s *Between Men* (1985) but (re)contextualized into the Mexican culture. As such, the role of the female characters functions as a distraction from the real relationship, that of the two men, by deflecting and projecting (homo)sexuality into the female counterpart. Subsequently, the female body functions to 'normalize' the yearning between the men and displace the homosexual desire into the apparent hetero

appeal. A flirty wink to homosexuality in which the film partakes, but ends in a heterosexual pairing. That is to say, de la Mora's book shines a light on the silenced/hidden homoeroticism that all macho cultures, especially in Mexico, actively obscure. Ultimately, this attempt at silencing is at the root of many of the violent acts against queers.

Similarly, in *Mexican Masculinities* (2003), Robert M. Irwin states that México as a homoerotic nation with its hypermasculinity and "intense male homosocial bonding common to national constructions inevitably produce an unintended homoerotics that often later engenders fierce homophobia." (pg. xxxvi). Irwin notes the 'unintended' impression, interpreting a 'hidden' message, offering a reading against the grain. A (queer) discourse that is backgrounded and thus culminates as unintended, although essential to rescue a 'queer reading' of the period, focuses on the idea of homosexuality as secretive, veiled. *Mexican Masculinities* (2003) traces different forms of literary representations in México, stemming from the 1810 Mexican Independence to the 1960s to delineate and demonstrate the intersections in the literary construction of the nation. Irwin notes that for México in the creation of its (inter)national presentation and reformulation during the Mexican Revolution, masculinity became a vital component of the "national constructions from the beginning of the national period... since nationhood is frequently constructed as a 'virile' institution, a brotherhood of men" (pg. xvii) with an attempt to maintain this macho (read: masculine) image as representative of power. As Michael Schuessler highlights in *México se escribe con J* (2010), this macho representation was, in part, a reaction to a 1901 queer masquerade ball known as *La fiesta*

*de los 41* where 42 men (half of them dressed in women's clothing) were raided during the Porfiriato. This raid, and its posterior news covering, birthed the notion of modern homosexuality as associated with femininity (as opposed to sexual encounters between two men) (pg. 137). It is important to note that the *fiesta* occurred during a critical period of Mexican nation-building, which was directly tied to the middle- and upper-class constructions of Mexico. The critic Carlos Monsiváis denotes that this famous masquerade ball inaugurates homosexuality in Mexico's mainstream, considering that the assistants of the gathering were "*al tanto de su suerte: pudieron formar parte de los 41*" (pg. 88) implying that homosexuality must have been readily available in an exclusive society since the attendants were invited and present. In other words, despite the government's attempt to silence *el escándolo de la época*, *La fiesta* proves that homosexuality was present before the raid<sup>2</sup>. Interestingly enough, gender expectations of masculinity in women were not punishable during this period. A clear example of this is *las Adelitas* who subverted gender expectations merely a decade later. Some women, like Amelio Robles (anachronically labeled transgender), became leaders and recognized by the government as men<sup>3</sup>.

Although homosexuality was seen as a sin and thus needed to be a secret, ironically, the constant reports on newspapers of the raid created and catapulted a homosexual identity into mainstream vocabulary, an unintended national coming out. Thus,

<sup>2</sup> For examples of *escándalos* in different epochs, one can refer to Zeb Torterici's *Sins Against Nature: Sex and Archives in Colonial New Spain work on colonial homosexual acts* and *La verdadera historia de la conquista de la Nueva España* by Bernal Díaz del Castillo (ch. 51, 61 and 82 particularly).

<sup>3</sup> For more on Amelio Robles see Gabriela Cano's "Amelio Robles, andar de soldado viejo. Masculinidad (trangénero) en la Revolución Mexicana" (2009).

masculinity, or the 'macho' ideal, became enthralled, almost-obsessed with being the bigger/better macho with a constant performance of emasculating other males as an attempt to not seem feminine (re: homosexual) (in Chapter 1, I will further elaborate on Octavio Paz' understanding of masculinity in *El laberinto de la soledad*).

José Quiroga in *Tropics of Desire* (2000) also engages with the idea of reading silenced/hidden messages. He begins his work analyzing the masked participants (re: closeted, yet public) during a pride parade. In his opening chapter, he references how certain participants wore a mask during the Argentinian pride parade of 1993 due to having recently "come out of one of the most ferocious military dictatorships of Latin America" (pg. 2). Nevertheless, this masked (in)visibility allowed for social politics and the necessary politics to engage with this act of courage and pride – albeit masked. The event created a memory, created a statement, a proof of existence. In brief, Quiroga's work analyzes the strategy of self-imposed homosexual silences as a political and aesthetic praxis, an aesthetic of refusing to confess (like the masked participants of the march) but still allowing to be read as queer (by being present in the march). Yet the praxis, the active experience of being (un)present, (un)masked, creates different modes of representation that contrast with the US-centric recovering of the political body through coming out (re: Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*), the 'out' bodies in Quiroga's work are (un)identifiable physical bodies that can potentially be assumed queer subjects in their presence in a Gay Pride parade. An ambiguous (dis)identification nonetheless.

Ben Sifuentes-Jauregui, in *The Avowal of Difference* (2014) argues that the Latin American queer is different from the US post-coming-out queer (like Sedgwick) due to

cultural differences. One such example is that of openly talking about sexuality (much more so if it is queer). Generally, in Latin America sexuality is a taboo topic that more often than not is only orally engaged in intimacy or, like Juan Gabriel who famously answered "dicen que lo que se ve no se pregunta" when reporter Fernando del Rincón asked "¿Juan Gabriel es gay?" in a 2002 interview. Thus, Sifuentes-Jauregui explores "how silences and disavowal emerge as central strategies of subject formation" (pg. 16) but a silence, as he notes, as **desiring** silence, rather than unspoken knowledge; an assertive "refusal to name that desire" or what he notes in Latin America as a "queerness-through-silence" (pg. 5). Thus, the silence that Sifuentes-Jauregui works is that of an "unidentity identity" where the subject is known to be queer but is not verbalized (like in Sedgwick). Whereas some of the work previously mentioned toil the silences as possibly queer (reading between the lines), Sifuentes-Jauregui's subjects are more-likely queer. Note that he is still evaluating silences, in this case, a self-imposed silence by the subjects of his analysis, similar to the masked participants in Quiroga's work.

These crucial works (De la Mora, Irwin, Quiroga, Sifuentes-Jauregui) engage with different manifestations of silenced queerness, mostly dealing with bodies/subjects that become queer through a reading against the grain. However, the politics of visibly queer bodies (la obvia, la loca, la butch, etc) are not participants in the previously cited works. For they deal with mostly straight-passing masculine bodies, with the exception of a chapter on *ficheras* which can be found in de la Mora's book. However, in the Mexican *fichera* genre of films (1970-80s), female sexuality (gasp!) caresses the audience through double entendres and sexual tones, but not particularly explicit. Although this dissertation

does not partake in the rapidly expanding scholarship on porn and post-porn in Latinx and Latin American Studies (see for example *Ethnopornography: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Archival Knowledge* [2020] edited by Pete Sigal, Zeb Tortorici and Neil L. Whitehead, or *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* [2014] by Mireille Miller-Young) it does focus on non-pornographic *explicit queerness*, a much needed dialogue in queer academia that often reads queerness against the grain.

I am aware, that many still suffer from the constrictions of “coming out”, and hence the need for self-imposed silence (the films *XXY* (Dir. Lucía Puenzo, 2009) and *Brokeback Mountain* (Dir. Ang Lee, 2005), exemplify the need of secrecy/silence for some queer subjects to survive. Yet, I find the necessity to move beyond the coming-out trope. Queer, as an identity (if one must call it that) is always-changing, always-becoming. I understand the importance of dealing with issues regarding violence and the necessity for some individuals to remain closeted for their safety. Let us not forget, Orlando's Pulse gay night club, where the mass shooting ended the life of 49 individuals on June 12, 2016. Not to mention the traumatic event for those who survived the occurrence. This attack on Latinx culture demonstrates the still existent blatant, violent homophobia and racism. In a lesser violent degree, homophobia can be present in the unaccepting household, in the streets when two non-normative people hold hands in public spaces. It is imperative to know and remember the importance of shaping social and cultural discourse that the tropes of HIV/AIDS, coming out, the violence faced by queer subjects have done, but it is also necessary to move on from the mostly negative representation of queer experiences. At the very least, there is a need to acknowledge the

positive aspects that arise within queer communi-*ties*, or the positive experiences despite the negative aspects, the need to look at the past, in order to critique the present, and change for the future.

There has been an incessant focus on the negative aspect of queerness, but what about what queer people have accomplished DESPITE all the negativity? What are the positive aspects of wearing the queer flag on your sleeve? The political act of vocalizing queer self-identity complicates and forces a dialogue to rethink the ideas of sex, gender, and sexuality further because, as a political act, the self-identification demands a conversation with its visibility. Thus, explicit queer sexualities (like those found in *Melodrama*, performances by Mariachi Arcoiris, *La casa de las flores* and *Tangerine*) have the most potential to reconfigure politics (beyond sex and gender politics/theory) by demanding, in *their* explicitness, to be engaged with, to re-formulate identities and actively include sex – that is part of what makes us ‘different’, is it not?

### **The inspiration for *raw and unapologetic queer sexualities***

A disruption, a reformulation, of the modalities of queer global discourse which focuses on the normative gay discourse and rights needs to also focus on corporeal and sexual emancipation that question queer identitarian categories and politics, a need to include, to emphasize how queerness is explored and expressed post coming out and how that might be accomplished in the relation between cultural texts and their audiences.

As a response to this repetitive structure, which, more often than not focuses on violence and coming out as the main narrative plots, this dissertation aims to focus on positivity and explicit queerness. Although this dissertation will focus on Mexican and

Latinx cultural productions, the inspiration came from earlier Latin American literary and filmic examples of what I am calling *unapologetic raw queer sexualities*. Some of these out and proud subjects with explicit transgressive queer sexuality can be found in the crónicas de Pedro Lemebel in *Loco Afán* (1996), or Luis Negrón's *Mundo Cruel* (2010) or the infamous La Manuela in *El lugar sin límites* (1966) by José Donoso or Adonis in *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* (1979) by Luis Zapata, or *XXY* (Dir. Lucía Puente, 2009), just to mention a few. I propose reading explicit queer sexualities (intersections and all) as political bodies and cultural declarations. Cultural declarations in the sense of assimilating or dis/identifying with the established sexual identities, forging a reconfiguration of the self that can take multiple political meanings and debunk the hegemonic sexual discourses.

José Esteban Muñoz, particularly with *Performing Disidentification*<sup>4</sup>, is a constant reference since his theory of disidentification is present throughout. Explicit queer sexuality, being both a bad subject and a disidentification, challenges and transgresses the socially prescribed gendered and embodied activities and roles which are frequently established in the dominant patriarchal and heteronormative discourse (a discourse that changes depending on context, like within Latinx or Mexico). My dissertation focuses on queer people of color that do not pass as straight; bodies/sexualities that are

4 Following the Pecheuxian Paradigm, Muñoz mentions that there are three options in which a subject is constructed into the ideological practices established: 'good subjects', 'bad subjects', and 'disidentification'. The good subject chooses and "identifies with discursive and ideological forms", in contrast, the bad subject is the one who "resists and attempts to reject the images and identifies sites provided by dominant ideology and proceeds to rebel, to counter-identify and turns against this symbolic system.", while stressing that the 'bad subject' ALSO reinforces dominant ideology. Consequently, the 'disidentification' subject is the one who "neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it, it works on and against dominant ideology" (pg.4-5). That is to say, 'disidentifying' has the potential to subvert the system the most.

unapologetically contesting the categories imposed on them by the outdated binary system in place. The aim is to demonstrate how their explicit queer sexuality disrupts the notions of sex, gender, and sexuality. This disruption demands a reconfiguration and use the potentiality of queerness for a better social and cultural future. These different representations demonstrate the impossibility of universalizing a "queer" identity in Latin American or Latinx identities. As such, each self-identified category must be *analyzed* and deconstructed to demonstrate exactly how it is that the subject blossomed. How are these subjectivities questioning the system, and more importantly, how and what is it politically and intellectually doing to the system that limits the subject?

My reading looks to destabilize the straight/gay (or macho/maricón in the Mexican context) binary, allowing to apprehend a fluid continuum of sexualities between the Latin American/Latinx context, that entails a focus as well on fluidity between México and US productions. I am interested in demonstrating how these types of queer sexualities are queer within the context (cultural or otherwise) that allows them to be(come) queer. While there are commonalities between México and the US, this dissertation attends to contextual differences of performing queerness and queer kinship for there is shared space, contact, and travelling of ideas that transcends the border, particularly with the rise of technological advancements like fast-speed internet.

Since any identity is always dependent on other identities and histories, each queer subject is limited/reactionary to the historical construction of the "queer identity" and can only be queer because there is a context in which one can potentially be so. Thus, this work intends to move from the "universalized" notion of the queer (Latinx/American)

and produce culture specific-readings of what it means to be queer and of color, when those identities shift from culture to culture and not assume that Latinx-American (queer) identities as stable. For example, with their unapologetic sexualities, Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles queers the performative space and expand their queerness into the receptive audience in the enactment of same sex *serenata*. Another example is the film *Tangerine* which further reconstructs the power relation in the normative family structure (often found in queer films) and displaces it with a queer community with equal power relations. Yet, neither cultural production focuses on the 'coming out' trope nor were they concerned with the dichotomous maricón/macho that emphasizes and classifies the subject according to the sexual position in the act. Instead, their concern was showcasing the positive aspects of queerness in two different genres: performance and film.

This dissertation is interested in the queer subject(ivities) that are not closet-cases, nor "queer-through-silence", but rather, are out, and "fully" realized subjects -at the very least, post-coming out. I am interested in how these out and proud subjects are represented and constructed in the Latinx and Latin American cultural productions of the 20th century and films of similar thematic, to bring to the front page (digital or otherwise) explicit queer sexualities that question what those categories imply in different contexts. More importantly, I am interested in the positive affectivity these intersectional cultural projects create beyond the literary or audiovisual performance, a bodily experience that produces new forms of knowledge and understanding. For example, through *Melodrama* (1983) by Luis Zapata there is a clear questioning and observation of gender as performative before the 1990 canonical *Gender Trouble* by Judith Butler while the work

includes the typical ‘happy ending’ but with a triumphant homosexual relationship instead. Similarly, the performances of Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles sidesteps the ‘coming out’ trope and the often-negative queer representations in order to display unapologetic raw queer sexuality through the same-sex *serenatas* that queer the space in which they work. Additionally, *La casa de las flores*, clearly inspired by the Mexican melodramatic telenovela, appropriates the cinematic codes of melodrama to displace heteronormativity with queer intimacy. Lastly, *Tangerine* encourages the formation of communi-*ties* where the power relations therein are equal and questions the uneven parent/child power relations in the heteronormative family structure.

There needs to be a push to approach queerness as something that can be identified as such, but cannot -should not- be defined, because by its nature, queerness refuses identification. My thesis proposes two principal dialogues: an initial discussion within US-based queer theory and the tensions that arise within “canonized queer theory” and the failures of said theory when QPoC, specifically Mexican and Chicanx cultural productions, are intersected by the problematics of a racialized body. Not only a racialized queer body, but sometimes, also, a migratory body, a body that travels between countries, between modes of being subject-ed, or bodies that carry their family’s history and culture, despite the new geographical and cultural movement. Like with Muñoz’s *Performing Disidentification*, I am interested in how these racialized bodies (dis)identify with/out the racial and sexual mainstream and how their identity is renegotiated in their culture by appropriating exclusionary political forms of subjectivity.

A second dialogue, a second tension, is to work the conflicts between the (re)presented queer Mexican cultural productions in order to create a dialogue and test the limits of US queer theory even though the Mexican cultural productions, or those of any other geographical location, present and work different forms of sexuality that are always constructed, produced, recognized and normalized through different forms of power. As such, to be queer and Mexican implies a closer look at the processes that produce the differences and inequalities that fabricate the (un)wanted bodily constructions.

Chapter one analyzes the 1983 novel *Melodrama* by Luis Zapata. I suggest that *Melodrama* is both an homage and a parody of the melodramatic genre in Mexican Golden Age cinema and how the novel ultimately destabilizes fixed notions of gender and sexuality that impact both straight and queer understandings of body, identity, and desire. This is done in part to demonstrate how gender and sexuality were already considered performative before Butler's theorization in *Gender Trouble*. In Chapter 2, I work with performances by El Mariachi Arcoris de Los Angeles by analyzing the different ways in which the queer mariachi queers spaces and dares to reimagine what it means to be queer and what it means to unsettle patriarchal, heteronormative frameworks that are historically associated not only with Latinx culture and Chicanx activism but indeed socially pervasive across the different ethnic groups that make up the United States of America. The following chapter "Más turbado: Mexican Sex(ualities) in *La casa de las flores*" analyzes Netflix's *La casa de las flores* (2018), an original series entangled with Mexican melodrama, particularly stemming from telenovelas, that relate

directly to queer world making issues as I pay attention to US notions of sexual identities that are appropriated by non-US subjects as well as the different forms in which these subjectivities exceed theoretical imagining of transnational queer (re)formation with a visibly queer sexuality. Lastly, in chapter four “Disidentification and Queer Worldmaking in *Tangerine*” I analyze the 2015 film *Tangerine* (Dir. Sean Baker) as an audiovisual project which allows the viewer to experience -with limitations- sexual otherness while questioning notions of Latinx family. I ask how is this cinematic and mediated experience establishing intimacy, affect and sensations? How is the spectator experiencing geographical and historical otherness while revamping the current geopolitical sexual climate through melodramatic affectivities?

The aim of "*Sácala (del closet): Mexican and Latinx Queer Politics and Cultural Visibility*" theorizes what I am calling unapologetic raw queer sexualities, which I see manifested in Latin American and Latinx cultural productions. I pay close attention to the transnational connections and influences not only between the neighboring countries of México and the US but also in global conversations with sexual identities in Latin America. Unapologetically raw queer sexualities bring visibility by merely existing. They bring different tropes that go beyond the habitual coming out story or HIV epidemic - tropes that still omnipresently plague literary and filmic depictions of queerness. Unapologetic raw queer sexualities penetrate hegemonic society sparking a much-needed conversation within and outside the queer communities. Throughout this dissertation, a connecting thread of queer kinship and disidentification allowed to engage in multimedia

forms (literature, performance, telenovela and film) to critique (and at times appropriate) the melodramatic mode and the gender politics at stake in these forms.

*“La vida es un drama, comadre, por no decir otra cosa que ofendería a sus oídos. Es un drama, cuando no una farsa, y así hay que entenderla.”* (Luis Zapata, *Melodrama*, pg. 59)

*“The desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode”* -Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*

### **Queer Futurity in *Melodrama* by Luis Zapata**

“El timbre de entrada de la casa hace que los padres del joven Alex Rocha sobresalten... Es el padre quien va a abrir, y descubre a los dos amantes...La madre del atlético joven corre a su encuentro, visiblemente conmovida. Bañada en llanto, lo abraza. –Alex, hijo mío, ¡Feliz Navidad! Mira mamá te presento al detective Axel Romero” (Zapata, pg. 100-1) the final scene of *Melodrama*, a 1982 literary work by Luis Zapata, embodies an unusual representation of queer life. Although *Melodrama* appears to pay homage to Mexico’s Golden Age cinematic melodramas, its stylistic play with visual, theatrical, and literary form as well as its representation of queer (homo)sexual desire jar with the dominant ideological inscriptions that melodrama pushed forward. I suggest that *Melodrama* is both homage and parody and that the novel ultimately destabilizes fixed notions of gender and sexuality that impact both straight and queer understandings of body, identity, and desire.

Melodrama, as a genre, has traditionally re-presented “the consolidation of family, the maintenance of the suburban home, the regulation of sexuality, the display and displacement of emotions” (Torres, pg. 283); plotlines advanced through the focus on a victimized character. My work, in contrast, demonstrates how Luis Zapata destabilizes the traditional melodrama scheme by inserting explicit queer sexuality and allowing

queer futurity to exist. Additionally, I argue that the always-changing writing style in *Melodrama* is a metaphor and an argument for sexual fluidity instead of fixed sexual and gender identities.

### **On Melodrama as a Genre and the Female Gender in Film**

*Melodrama*, as a title, gives the reader information about a genre, a narrative mode, and the assumption of the reader having the necessary historical and ideological context that the novel seeks to subvert. Soon after the title page, the reader encounters the epigraph “‘Sí, Queta, está todo muy caro, hasta la felicidad.’ De la película mexicana *Si fuera una cualquiera*”. *Melodrama* instantly creates a direct intertextuality with the Golden Age Mexican melodramas. This filmic intertextuality, ever-present throughout the work, evokes what Laura U. Marks, in *The Skin of the Film*, denominates as “intercultural cinema”. She defines intercultural cinema as “experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge or living as a minority ... many of these works evoke **memories** both individual and cultural, through an appeal to non-visual knowledge, embodied knowledge and experiences...” (pg. 2). *Melodrama* suggests a movement from cinema to the novel, a remediation of cinema that activates the reader/viewer’s extrinsic knowledge, which comes from the collective memory of these filmic melodramas. I make use of collective memory due to the popularity and ubiquity of Mexican filmic melodramas on Spanish language television in the United States as well as in México. They are a memory that is not simply in the past but continuously actualized by current viewers. Their popularity is

so, that it has a dedicated channel (*De Película Clásico*<sup>1</sup>) strictly for these black and white films. Although, it is a Mexican owned channel, it can still be purchased as an Add-On on cable tv provided by the biggest Spanish speaking content network: Univision. Additionally, many of these films are available for free on YouTube and broadcasted in Spanish-speaking channels off prime-time television.

Before entering into further thematic and structural analysis of Zapata's work, it is necessary to recapitulate the characteristics of Latin American melodrama to see how *Melodrama* comes to destabilize its predominantly ideological meanings. According to Ana M. Lopez, in "Tears and Desires", Mexican Golden Age films (produced in the 1930s, 40s, and 50s) have been criticized for their excess sentimentality being "imitative of Hollywood, unrealistic, alienating and sentimental" (pg. 148) and for ideologically catering to the interests of the dominant classes; by the 50s and 60s, the 'old' cinema was "ideologically and commercially bankrupt" (ibid.). Yet, according to Lopez, even though Mexican cinema was considered a 'poor imitation' of Hollywood melodramas<sup>2</sup>, many critics did not realize that these 'imitations' were the first to "constantly circulate Latin American images, voices, songs and history; the first to capture and sustain the interest of multinational audiences" (ibid.). Mexican melodramas created an image of and a tradition for Latin America addressing new problematics arising from Mexico's sociopolitical

<sup>1</sup> According to the Univision website, *De Película Clásico* "offers passionate movie fans the very best titles from the Golden Age of Latin Cinema which celebrates Mexico's greatest movie stars of all time: from Maria Felix La Doña and Jorge Negrete, to Pedro Infante and Joaquín Pardavé"

<https://corporate.univision.com/portfolio/properties/de-pelicula-clasico/> Accessed 12/17/17.

<sup>2</sup> Similarly, In *Home is Where the Heart Is: Studies in Melodrama and the Woman's Film*, Christine Gledhill mentions that melodrama (US, in the 50's and 60 films) was considered as "predominantly pejorative... anti-value for a critical field in which tragedy and realism became cornerstones of 'high' cultural value, needing protection from mass, 'melodramatic' entertainment... related to 'excesses' of emotional manipulateness and association with femininity" (Gledhill, pg. 5)

context. These films continue to re-create national, ethnic and gendered identity but also highlight contradictory discourses in the social formation of the 30s-50s. Lopez notices three major tendencies, or subgenres, appearing in Latin American melodramas: those oriented around the epic melodramas (reworking national history, especially the Mexican Revolution), those centered on family (love, sexuality and parenting), and the cabareteras. These last two subgenres are particularly important due to their focus on the representation of female sexuality.

According to Lopez, Latin American cinema melodramas benefited from the star system, a star system that consisted of popular music entertainers as the main actors of the films who heightened the film's 'entertainment value' by cementing the rise of musical performances. Music and musical performances reinvested the narratives with "emotion so that the melodramatic pathos emerged in the moment of performance itself" (pg. 150) allowing for characters, like the suffering mother. Peter Brooks mentions that "melodrama starts from and expresses the anxiety brought by a frightening new world in which the traditional patterns of moral order no longer provide the necessary social glue" (pg. 20), which in the case of *Época de Oro* melodramas meant the post-revolutionary period in México. The Mexican Revolution changed social life, the family structure was in shambles and it "served as the inevitable mirror where the country recognized its physiognomy" (Lopez, pg. 152). The Mexican Revolution meant to liberate people and create much needed social change, however, the Revolution (and the filmic depiction of it) created "supermen and constituted a discourse that associated virility with social transformation" (Franco, pg. 102) which in turn alienated and marginalized women again.

The Mexican Revolution destabilized gender roles (think of *las Adelitas/soldaderas*), however, epic melodramas brought back the normative family representation, relegating women into the ‘home’ and private sphere, no longer allowed to be part of public relations.

In *Mexican Masculinities*, Robert Mckee Irwin notes how in the creation of Mexican (inter)national presentation and re-formulation of the Mexican Revolution, masculinity became a key component of the “national constructions from the beginning of the national period... since nationhood is frequently constructed as a ‘virile’ institution, a brotherhood of men” (pg. xvii) with an attempt to maintain this macho (read: masculine) image as representative of power. Like Judith Butler, Irwin draws attention to the way gender is not a given but performed and enacted.<sup>3</sup> However, even before the Mexican Revolution heteronormative gender roles were unstable. The queer masquerade ball known as *La fiesta de los 41*<sup>4</sup> were 42 men (half of them dressed in women’s clothing) were raided during the *porfiriato*. Newspapers widely covered this event at the time and thus contributed to inscribing modern homosexuality as, however, directly associated to femininity. Schuessler notes how “this scandalous event was immediately documented and circulated both verbally and graphically throughout the capital... local tabloids reported the outrageous event with great interest...” (pg. 137) creating, ironically, visibility for homosexuality. It is important to note that at the time,

<sup>3</sup> In her groundbreaking *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler, on talking about gender, disseminates how certain “acts, gestures enactments, generally construed are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (pg. 136)

<sup>4</sup> Although there were 42 men during the raid, one of the men in the ball was Porfirio Diaz’ son in law, and in order to protect his name and reputation, on ‘official’ government records there were only 41 men present.

homosexuality was thought of as 'feminine' or what is commonly known in Mexico as *loca* or having 'effeminate' characteristics. Thus, 'masculine' looking homosexuals were not considered homosexuals because they 'looked' and 'passed' as 'straight'.

The critic Carlos Monsiváis argues that this famous masquerade ball catapults homosexuality into Mexico's mainstream society because those attending the gathering were "al tanto de su suerte: pudieron formar parte de los 41" (pg. 88). Monsiváis here implies that homosexuality must have been readily acceptable to upper class Mexican society. Despite the government's attempt to silence the reports on the masquerade, the newspaper coverage further disseminated not only the scandal but at once the possibility of homosexuality. In other words, homosexuality must have been present before the *fiesta* but became visible to the consumers of mainstream newspapers. Through the raid, and the subsequent uproar following the 'discovery' of the *fiesta*, the 'homosexual' identity came out of the closet and into mainstream society. If homosexuality did not exist in mainstream vocabulary prior to the *fiesta*, it most certainly became an opportunity for identification after the ball. As a reaction to the effeminacy of drag performance, many men became obsessed with the need to perform the 'macho' ideal of masculinity, to prove their manliness (re: heterosexuality) which at times manifested as emasculating other (presumed heterosexual) males. Scholar Michael Schuessler states that, during that period, to be an idealized man meant "valentía, fe en el Pueblo, virilidad sin mancha, desprecio a los débiles y los blandengues" (pg. 96) which was a stark contrast to the way the assistants of the *fiesta* were portrayed. In the drawings of José

Guadalupe Posada, for example, some of the participants were portrayed as ‘mustachioed men dressed in silks and satin’ (Schuessler, pg. 133).

In *El laberinto de la soledad*, Octavio Paz mentions that in the Mexican context a true ‘macho’ must *chingar*. A word with multiple meanings and usages, *chingar* boils down to aggression: “incomodar, picar, zaherir, hasta ... violar, desgarrar y matar... el verbo denota violencia, salir de sí mismo y penetrar por la fuerza en otro. Herir, rasgar, violar -cuerpos, almas, objetos-, destruir.” (pg. 100). In this understanding of masculinity, (homo)sexual encounters between two men do not make all participants homosexual. The loophole to the homosexual clause instead falls under the penetrated/penetrator dichotomy. *El chingado* -the fucked one, the receptor- is the homosexual of the pair because he is feminized. To fuck (in all its connotations) another male forges the idea of the penetrator as a symbolic macho that “indica el triunfo de lo cerrado, del macho, del fuerte, sobre lo abierto” (pg. 101)<sup>5</sup>, or put simply, fucking another male demonstrates the penetrator’s *manliness/machoness*. This ‘conquering’ turns the penetrated male into a female in their passiveness/receptorness – or less-macho-version of masculinity. Fucking another man, quite literally, makes the penetrator the bigger macho. This dichotomy is still socially present and indeed also informs notions of masculinity elsewhere in Latin America<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> This open/close dichotomy of *chingar o chingado* is a result, according to Paz, of being *hijos de la chingada* or la Malinche. La Malinche became the mother of *los chingados* the second she betrayed (as he sees it) her nation by allowing Hernan Cortés to open her. Ultimately, allowing the rape, la chingada, gave birth to the *mestizo* identity. Thus, to be ‘macho’, to be closed, implies the violence of opening/*chingando* others in the process of maintaining the ‘macho’ image.

<sup>6</sup> In Mexican culture, this dichotomy is still being reproduced in the ‘chichifo’ (straight male prostitute who sleeps with men but is strictly a top) or the ‘mayate’ (straight male prostitute who is willing to receive anal

The period of the Mexican Revolution, in turn, opened spaces for women to fight and participate as cooks and caretakers of the fighting troops in the social (r)evolution, women pushed up against the social constrictions of the period, which confined “respectable” women to hearth and home. More precisely, as *las soldaderas/ las Adelitas*<sup>7</sup>) participated in the Revolutionary forces, they destabilized heteronormative gendered arrangements. One such example is Amelia Robles who became a particularly interesting case of gender *transgression* during the revolutionary period. Colonel Amelio Robles participated in the Mexican Revolution, however, *he* was not always Amelio. According to historian Gabriela Cano, in *Sex in Revolution* (2006), women were allowed to participate in the Revolution but not in battle. Yet, some women trans-dressed as men to participate in the war. Such is the case of Colonel Amelio Robles. The colonel lived the first two decades of his life as a woman. Nevertheless, the masculinization of Amelio began when he was a child and participated in activities that were “not proper” for girls (learning to tame and ride horses, shoot guns, etc.). Amelio began to dress and perform masculinity. Amelio found an area of tolerance while participating in the revolution because he *looked* and performed masculinity. He even had the luxury to find “aceptación de sus compañeros de armas que admiraban su valentía y sus capacidades como guerrillero” (Cano, pg. 20). Amelio’s case is only a few years after *la fiesta de los*

sex), the latter seemed ‘less’ of a man for allowing himself to be penetrated defined in “‘Vestidas, Locas, Mayates’ and ‘Machos’: History and Homosexuality in Mexican Cinema” by Michael Schuessler (2005). Interestingly enough, this idea of ‘passivity’, or being penetrated, as less-than-man can be seen across many Latin American cultures. One example is the Chilean comedy webseries #Mamones (2016- ) by Francesc Morales where he created the #SoyPasivoSoyPersona parody to demonstrate the still lingering connotation of homosexuality as only feminine, among many other issues that still plague the queer community.

<sup>7</sup> For an in-depth analysis of the different forms in which *las Adelitas/soldaderas* aided/transgressed during the Mexican Revolution see: *Las soldaderas* by Elena Poniatowska (1999) and *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military* by Elizabeth Salas (1990).

41, yet while the *invertidos* were punished for transgressing (being feminine) their gender roles, Amelio was applauded for his heroic trans/gressive participation.

Amelio, through courage and personal character, achieved acceptance of his heterosexuality by performing maleness, his 'masculine' qualities aligning with the nationalist narrative on male gender. Among his nationalist patriotic and ideological attitudes, Colonel Robles was the revolutionary male soldier who "tiene la capacidad de responder de manera inmediata y violenta a las agresiones, maneja las armas y los caballos con maestría." In other words, Robles was the embodiment of male gender expectations. Further proving his masculinity, Robles maintained "sus relaciones de pareja con mujeres"(Cano, 22) adjusting to heteronormative models, which are not only conventional, but also re-produce the binary of heterosexual genders. It is important to note that he maintained his male performance after the Mexican Revolution through a (trans)gendered heterosexual life. Not only did his community accept and recognize his embodiment and subjectivity as a man, the government too legitimized his male persona. The legitimization of his masculine identity came in 1974 when Colonel Amelio Robles was decorated "como Veterano de la Revolución, y no como veterana" (ibid.). Amelio Robles' body became a symbol of political resistance to the hegemonic governmental impositions of gender by not participating in the Revolution as woman, but by successfully appropriating the masculine gender. Amelio resisted the gender roles of the time in his transgression of femininity, instead performing masculinity by re-assuming and reinstating the heteronormative gender of his choice, as opposed to the one assigned at birth.

Unfortunately, despite the transgressions of gender norms in the revolutionary period, the colonial heritage has continued to hold women to catholic, heteronormative and patriarchal traditions. The origin of Mexican national identity, as Ana Lopez maintains, is mediated by two seemingly opposite female ideals: the Virgen de Guadalupe, the patron saint, on one side and la Malinche, the traitor *chingada*. Ideals that also manifest in Mexican descent communities abroad; communities abroad that think of La Malinche as the one who “fucked the white man who conquered the Indian peoples of Mexico and destroyed their culture. Ever since, brown men have been accusing her of betraying her race, and over the centuries continue to blame her entire sex for this ‘transgression’” (Moraga, pg. 174-5). Thus, La Malinche is thought as having given birth to modern México, a mestizo nation with complicated notions of nationalism. As Carlos Monsivais notes, in “Reir llorando (Notas sobre la cultura popular)”, Mexicans became the sons of “la chingada o la vendida”, always condemning la Malinche.

After the revolution, Mexican cinema contrasted the figure of La Malinche as the original mother of modern México with a ‘proper’ and idealized mother figure, a mother who has not been fucked like La Malinche. Films like *Cuando los hijos se van* (Dir. Juan Bustillos, 1941), *Corona de lágrimas* (Dir. Alejandro Galindo, 1968), *Cruz de amor* (Dir. Fernando Curiel, 1968) present the abnegated mother figure who was born to be that: a mother that sacrifices herself for her ungrateful children. The mother figure portrayed as asexual and saintly functioned as the “central ideological tool for social and moral cohesion” (Lopez, 154) a maternal figure disposed of her sexuality to contrast the sexual Malinche –or the ‘fallen woman’. One filmic representation of the ‘fallen woman’ is

*Maria Candelaria* (1944) in which Dolores del Rio portrays an indigenous woman shunned for being the daughter of a prostitute by her own community, eventually stoned to death because the community thought a painting of a naked woman resembled the indigenous woman Dolores del Rio portrayed and women were not allowed to be sexual.

Yet, parallel to the idealized desexualized mother and the prostitute daughter condemned to death, a new female figure arose during the *Época de Oro* films. For the first time in filmic melodramas, women were able to exude different “forms of desire on the screen... so sexual, so willful, so excessive, so able to express their anger at their fate through vengeance” (Lopez, 158). With María Felix in *Doña Bárbara* (1943) the role of the abnegated woman was no longer the only female representation. And yet, women like Doña Barbara, who were presented as powerful and sensual, could however never be allowed to be both sensual and a ‘mother’. In the case of *Doña Barbara*, the titular character was a powerful woman at the cost of being a bad mother. The film portrays her as anti-family oriented, a person who does not care for her daughter Marisela and who does not strive to be the glue that holds the family together. The main characters, Doña Barbara (representative of savageness and moral decay) and Santos Luzardo (representing salvation) are in a constant political battle of the wills. On the one hand, Doña Barbara becomes a powerful cacique (with many men to her disposal and will) explained in the film as a direct response to male violence, including childhood rape and the killing of her lover. She ultimately becomes a femme fatale as her form of revenge. In her quest for revenge, Doña Barbara forgets to care for her family and land, allowing and aiding to the moral degeneration and corruption that runs her lands. The possibility of a

powerful female figure, however, appears as unsustainable. In contrast, Santos Luzardo, represents the eventual evolution - and hope - of these precarious lands. As his name rightly suggests, he is conveniently an almost mirror-reflection of the biblical Jesus who returns to 'save' the 'fallen woman', as if suggesting that Doña Barbara's 'wild' sexuality needed to be 'tamed' and controlled by Santos –a man she falls in love with, and ultimately, is 'saved' by him.

The representation of the female prostitute figure, which was present in family melodramas (like *Maria Candelaria*), was further emphasized and explored in the *cabaretera* subgenre, leading to a similar possibility of imagining femininity differently. A historically shunned subjectivity, the prostitute came to symbolize México's 'new' cosmopolitanism; a cosmopolitanism breaking away from the Porfirian moralized image of México. In the *cabareteras* films, female desires were exalted, allowing women to have power over their own selfhood and sexuality. Women now had the power of their sexuality "to sell at will, to name her price, to choose her victim" (Lopez, pg. 159) vindicating female heterosexuality, allowing female subjectivities to be envisioned and new identities forged in filmic melodramas. Nevertheless, such moments of liberation continued silencing other historic forms of sexualities like Amelio Robles, queer sexualities that destabilize heterosexual convictions of gender and sexuality, sexualities that demonstrate a richer menagerie of gender performativity and sexual identities.

## On Male Masculinities in Mexican Melodramas

Whereas Ana Lopez vindicates female (hetero)sexuality in a splendid manner, Sergio de la Mora, analyzing the same Mexican Golden Age era in *Cinemachismo* (2006), highlights homosexuality and homoeroticism as part of the sexual equation in cinematic representations of Mexican national identity. De la Mora argues that the “specificity of Mexican machismo resides in its self-consciousness and its official decreed status as the distinctive component of Mexican national identity” (pg. 2), a self-consciousness well documented in literature and murals<sup>8</sup>. Mexican machoness has been composed through male homosocial structures. De la Mora states that the macho figure became a response to the alleged “effeminacy of the Contemporáneos group ... many of whom held jobs in the civil service and some of whom were homosexuals” (De la Mora, pg. 2). The Contemporáneos<sup>9</sup> (established in the late 1920-early 30s) were a group of young “effeminate” intellectuals who were affected by the inherent machista culture and were “faithfully rendered as such in an engraving by Orozco where they can be seen posing, preening, pinching and cackling, all under the foreboding -and apocalyptic- sky” (Schuessler, pg. 139) replicating the idea of femininity as weakness. Robert M. Irwin notes the way hypermasculinity, in Mexican cultural productions, consists of an “intense

<sup>8</sup> The masculinization of the national Mexican culture can be seen in the works of writers of the Revolución, for example, Mariano Azuela (*Los de abajo*), Carlos Fuentes (*La muerte de Artemio Cruz*), Martín Luis Guzmán (*El águila y la serpiente*), Juan Rulfo (*Pedro Páramo*). This can also be seen in the murals of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros.

<sup>9</sup> Los Contemporáneos was a Mexican intellectual modernist group that promoted cultural universalism; prominent members included Salvador Novo, Xavier Villaurrutia, Elias Nandino, Jaime Torres Bodet, Jorge Cuesta, Bernardo Ortiz de Montellano, Gilberto Owen, José Gorostiza, and Enrique González Rojo. Although they lost the ‘public’ debate on machoness and masculinity, the *Contemporáneos* won in the end by becoming institutional members of the new Mexican state. Thus, their model of masculinity was silenced, but paradoxically shaped the country itself.

male homosocial bonding common to national constructions” (pg. xxxvi) which inescapably and involuntarily produce homoerotics (with the homosocial tendencies of men-only spaces), often engendering homophobia, think for example the constant derogatory comments against Luis Cervantes, in *Los de abajo* by Mariano Azuela, who is often bashed by the other men<sup>10</sup>. This active bashing of other males –perceived homosexuals- promoted the macho image that permeates cultural production: the charro. The image of the charro circulated in film, music (rancheras, mariachi), performance, sports (rodeo, equestrian), etc. (De la Mora).

De la Mora’s analysis centers on cinema since it is the “modern technology that enables the invention, reinvention, and circulation of national models” (pg. 3), a medium with unprecedented reach and the capacity of reshaping social identities and, by consequence, the nation. *Cinemachismo* explores representations of masculinity (whether heterosexual or not) that destabilize, denaturalize and defamiliarize the institutions and practices that make gender. De la Mora demonstrates how homosexuality has always been part of the macho image present(ed) in cinema. Masculinity can be said to be an identity that is constantly changing, forming, becoming a new iteration in each representation, an always visible power system. De la Mora notes that Mexican films inform the understanding of how proper men must “look, think, feel, express themselves.” (pg. xiii) a dominant image that gets questioned with *compadrismo* in ‘buddy comedies’ when disguised homoerotic tendencies are revealed. According to De

<sup>10</sup> “¡Qué espíritus alcohólicos ni qué!. . . Fue cosa convenida entre el curro [Luis] y el general. -¡Claro! Pa mí el tal curro no es más que un. . . -A mí no me gusta hablar de los amigos en ausencia -dijo el güero Margarito-; pero sí sé decirles que de dos novias que le he conocido, una ha sido para. . . mí y la otra para el general. Y prorrumpieron en carcajadas.” (Azuela, pg. 94)

la Mora, *compadrismo* and its homoerotics question three things primarily: a crisis in Mexican patriarchy, the 'macho' image, and a crisis in the film industry.

In "Pedro Infante Unveiled", de la Mora focuses on Pedro Infante as the "maximum embodiment of Mexican masculinity and the archetype of the working-class heterosexual male" (pg. 15) to not only analyze his performance of masculinity but also the silences, ambiguities and tensions that arise with some of his in-film-buddies. He notes the way male sexual and gender transgressions are a constant form of pleasure. One such example is through the usage of *el albur* -popular sayings- like "macho probado es macho calado" implying the need for men to sexually experiment with other men, as that would resolve whether or not the person is heterosexual. Another reading is the implication, following Paz' example, of a true macho who has *chingado* another male thus proving his manliness by dominating/opening an/other male. Even though homosexuality, as implicit as it may be, is always part of the cult of machismo, it is not without its difficulties. The penetration of homosexuality into the macho narrative gives space to re-create the definition of what is and what makes a man. This proves that masculinity and sexuality can be experienced, expressed and ultimately performed by anyone to be considered a man – just like Amelio Robles executed so well.

In agreement with de la Mora, masculinity becomes a site of disputes since it is "not fixed and monolithic but open to contestation, change, and resignification" (pg. 70) as homosocial/homoerotic expressions continue to be re-signified at any given point in time. These homoerotic expressions have not disappeared, rather, these expressions have been constantly transgressing, always-constantly creating 'new' and updated forms of

masculinity. De la Mora argues how in Infante's films, the male buddies have a homoerotic tension (dis)guised/resolved in the creation of an erotic triangle by displacing the homoerotic tension to a third subject: a woman that mediates the sexual tension between the men. De la Mora's reading is based on a Sedgwick-esque approach of reading silences as potentially queer<sup>11</sup>. In the pioneering *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve K. Sedgwick argues, among other points, the idea of the 'secret' or the 'unsaid' (re: homosexuality) as a threat to heterosexuality. With Sedgwick, the homosexual body is never fully realized, never out of the closet, but rather, one that is always insinuated, always a secret, an always-present ghost haunting normativity. Similarly, de la Mora argues that some of Infante's 'buddy' films flirt with homoeroticism, winking at an interpellated queer viewer.

One example of homoeroticism is through gratuitous exhibitionism of Infante's body, with each movie showing his "broad chest and shoulders and back in moments of pure spectacle that clearly encourage the spectator to take pleasure in looking at his body as an erotic object" (pg. 84).<sup>12</sup> The gratuitous objectification creates space for homoeroticism to arise, thus, sexuality needed to be displaced to a woman as the central male bond. In *¿Qué te ha dado esa mujer?* (1951) the narrative revolves around the struggles of both primary male actors to maintain their relationship in spite of conflict over women:

<sup>11</sup> Eve. K. Sedgwick in her canonical *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990).

<sup>12</sup> To contrast, according to Laura Mulvey, in Hollywood films (1950s and '60s) women were coded with a "to-be-looked-at-ness" which assumed that the 'bearer of the look' must be a heterosexual male. Furthermore, she mentioned the male gaze as having either a "voyeuristic" (seeing women as "to be looked at") or a "fetishistic" (seeing women as "the lack" (re: fear of castration) dimension. With Infante, the male now has "to be looked at" qualities, demanding a new form of reading Mexican melodramas.

The conflict-ridden friendship begins when the bachelor Luis Macías (Luis Aguilar) befriends the homeless vagabond and jinx Pedro Chavez (Infante). Luis offers Pedro room and board with the agreement that Pedro performs the domestic chores, an implicitly gendered division of labor that fixes Pedro in a feminine role...The gendered attachment displayed by both characters registers a misogynist and homerotic subtext underpinning this relationship in which each man uses women to get the attention of the other *cuate*. (pg. 91)

De la Mora demonstrates how Infante's character creates what Sedgwick calls an 'erotic triangle', underscoring a complicated matrix of desire that is neither homosexual nor heterosexual, always-hidden yet always-there. The erotic triangle (be)comes apparent for the interpellated queer viewer. With this tension, the 'buddy' films introduce the sexual ambiguity that registers as heterosexual male anxiety through the homosocial relationships. Although Ana M. Lopez rescues the heterosexual feminine gender and female sexuality in the cinematic and social sphere to demand and give voice to conflicting visibility, de la Mora utilizes the 'buddy' films of Infante to vindicate Mexican masculinities as a zone filled with tensions that give space for critique of the lingering macho image. Yet, both Lopez and de la Mora's critique read a subtext, a secondary theme, in the melodramas of the Mexican Golden Age era. In contrast, Luis Zapata in *Melodrama* does not work with sexuality as a subtext, rather, Zapata puts sexuality in your face, so to speak. In *Melodrama* the male gender/masculinity is complicated further with explicit queer sexuality, questioning what it means to be queer, masculine and sexual.

## **On the Structure and *History of Melodrama***

Historically, melodramatic tendencies found in Mexican films developed into *telenovelas*<sup>13</sup> -with their popularity- maintaining the cultural memory alive, a memory of *mexicanidad*<sup>14</sup> that *Melodrama* taps into. The literary work itself can be read as an allegory advocating identity as malleable and always changing, morphing, becoming. The author constantly questions not only the character's sexual identity but also the reader's identity through specific filmic images and theatricality.

Scene<sup>15</sup> 1 opens with “La pantalla se ilumina poco a poco y nos descubrimos en el interior de una gran residencia. Casi es de día. Sus habitantes aún duermen.” (Zapata, pg. 11) creating an initial reaction, an awareness, of not “reading” a novel, but rather “seeing” a piece of work unfolding before our eyes. This opening is quite ironic since “la pantalla se ilumina” feels out of place considering it is, well, a printed work - and unless the reading of *Melodrama* is done on an electronic device (which did not exist during the original publication), *la pantalla* will not be illuminating. The opening reads as a film script. But not just any script, it is a script where the narrator and the reader/viewer are part of the work, signaled by the first-person plural pronoun in “nos descubrimos”. From the very first line of his work, Zapata is already blurring the lines between a filmic script

<sup>13</sup> For an interesting analysis in the persistence and popularity of telenovelas (and reception theory) read “A Nocturnal Map to Explore a New Field” by Jesús Martín-Barbero in *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader* (2004)

<sup>14</sup> *Mexicanidad* is defined by Zuzana M. Pick, in *Constructing the Image of the Mexican Revolution* (2010), as “a powerful trope designating at once a search for authenticity and a fashioning of an identity capable of accommodating the multiple, even conflicting features that make up the national imaginary. (pg. 5).

<sup>15</sup> Considering the mixture of technical filmic language and literary writing, I will be alternating between “Scene” (when said portion of the work imitates film) or “Chapter” (when said portion of the work imitates a novel).

and a novel due to these annotations. Filmic annotations contextualize and describe how the scene should be framed, shot, illuminated, and cut, they are meant to set up the scenario, and they give the reader a context of location, or daytime for example. Yet, a viewer of a film, or a spectator of a theater piece, would never be able to see/read these annotations because they are meant to aid those constructing the stage, by creating verisimilitude in the film/theater being watched as if they were not constructions. Take for example the opening scene from the award-winning Mexican film *La jaula de oro* (2013):

EXT. PUESTO PELÍCULAS PIRATAS / CALLE CENTRO CIUDAD DE  
GUATEMALA - DÍA

La carátula de una película en la que vemos a “Shane”, vaquero rubio de mediana edad con aura heroica, unas manos la sostienen.

JUAN levanta la mirada. Viste pantalón de mezclilla viejo y una camiseta.

Mira la película en una tele, de reojo checa la calle.

In this script, the filmic annotation references the *mise-en-scène*, how the sequence should be constructed by giving context (Calle centro, Ciudad de Guatemala) and the time of day, followed by a description of the first images to be seen through the camera lens “la carátula de una película”.

Zapata similarly plays with the filmic annotations forcing the ‘reader-identity’ to transform into the ‘viewer-identity’. In the inclusion of the reader (*nos*), the narrator is guiding with certain cognitive restrictions, demonstrating their<sup>16</sup> limited situation in a spacial-time constriction (that of the ‘director’ of *Melodrama*) that is a different ‘space-time’ from that in which the story develops. At first this narrator becomes metafictional because of their script-annotation-like role describing the screen’s action: “la pantalla se

<sup>16</sup> In *Melodrama*, the narrator is never given a gender (nor can one be deducted from descriptions), thus, to not assume any gender, I use they/them pronouns when talking about the narrator.

ilumina poco a poco” instead of the technical term FADE IN. Yet, when the narrator is inserted in the novel they inhabit a different ‘novelistic time’. For example, when the narrator describes the set “Un enorme vestíbulo separa y conecta a la vez la puerta de entrada con el comedor y la sala... Ningún otro objeto impide o distrae, la vista de la monumental escalera en abanico” (Zapata, pg. 11) the narrator implies the falsification and highly controlled filmic set, a “reality” that is staged and arranged in order to create the ‘real’ story of the ‘filmic’ portions of the work – which is where the narrative action happens.

Midway through Scene 1, the narrator breaks the relationship with the reader (and the written style) by informing the reader that “El prelude de esta *historia* termina, y se inicia la historia propiamente dicha en estos términos...” (Zapata, pg. 13, my emphasis) marking, in their own words, the change towards a more familiar and conventional narrator found in literary works, highlighting the fluidity of identity. The reader/viewer that once was part of the scene (“nos descubrimos”) is now *transformed* into the implied reader/listener of the *historia* to follow. Creating a distance between reader/viewer and the narrator.

In *Melodrama*, the annotations are a mixture of prose and script describing the scene “nos descubrimos en una grande casa” to more instructions: “Grandes cortinas. Cortinas por todas partes”, “Ningún otro objeto impide, o distrae, la vista de la monumental escalera en abanico. Un asiduo espectador de películas mexicanas la reconocería inmediatamente...” cementing the explicit filmic intertextuality with *películas mexicanas*. Soon after establishing the connections with film, the narrator

destabilizes our reading 'mode' by changing the genre with "En este *relato* siempre estará presente..." (pg. 11). The versatility of the narrator's active flipping between positions (from 'film script' to 'historia' to 'relato') of writing and reading/seeing makes a *queer* (as in non-normative) narrator in the refusal of categorization, constantly performing and taking on different identities, always becoming... Identities that the narrator utilizes to guide the reader, when they are reading, or the viewer, when they are "seeing" and "hearing" the work. An identity that is constantly contested and changed; never taking for granted any form, demonstrating the limits of those categories, categories that will be used to tell the story whenever they are helpful to the ever-changing narrator. As a result, the narrator constantly *transforms* the receptor in the symbiotic relationship from reader to viewer to listener never letting the receptor stay in any 'identity' for too long.

The 'audio-visual' elements in *Melodrama* pull from the Mexican collective memory, creating and evoking audio-visual melodramatic queues as the story unfolds. From the beginning *Melodrama* demonstrates the artifice of films by giving the reader/viewer a 'behind the scenes' view into his work, so indeed, *descubrimos* as Zapata puts it. In *What is cinema?* (1967), Andre Bazin mentions how with the introduction of the camera the artist is "now in a position to create the illusion of three-dimensional space within which things appeared to exist as our eyes in reality see them" (Bazin, pg. 11)<sup>17</sup> emphasizing the 'realness' of the subject present before us. He continues

<sup>17</sup> This in turn brings a debate on the 'real'. On the one hand, it is the idea of film having the capacity to demonstrate reality, since the camera is recording and coming into contact with the subject(s). In

mentioning how photography and cinema “are discoveries that satisfy, once and for all in its very essence, our obsession with realism” (pg. 12) but Zapata destabilizes this ‘reality’ in his work, since he is not pretending to re-present reality, rather, he is ridiculing and taking to extremes the ‘realities’ that melodramas have presented and injects that ‘reality’ with a dose of queer futurity. In the process of creating an homage/parody of melodramas, Zapata subverts the melodramatic representations of love by including a homosexual couple as the main love interest filled with explicit sexual representation - uncommon for melodramas- while at the same time demonstrating the malleability and permeability of identities through constant change.

In Chapter 14, *Melodrama* has now been structured as a novel again but still playing with ‘proper’ dialogue guidelines (mixing “” and - for dialogue), not following one mode of writing as if to insinuate how any given manifestation of an identity has the lingering properties of a previous manifested form, never able to fully remove the previous identity, instead, bringing those characteristics to the most-current manifestation. Halfway in the chapter, the viewer encounters:

INTERIOR. DIA. LONCHERIA DE  
BARRIO POPULAR.

**El joven Alex Rocha y el detective Axel Romero gastan sus últimos cincuenta pesos en la lonchería ubicada ... Como fondo se escucha un trío en la rocola.**

Angélica Tornero notices in her article, that “la ausencia de cierta información propia de este discurso, hace pensar que se ha realizado una adecuación” (pg. 55) because even though this section might, at first appear as ‘filmic’ or annotation-like, it doesn’t have

opposition, are the formalists which believe that “reality” is not depicted, but rather, framed and arranged in the editing process.

“marcas propias de los movimientos de cámara” (ibid.), like previous scenes have done before. Rather, the descriptions emphasize the musical element of *Melodrama*<sup>18</sup>. Following the previous *adecuación*, Zapata creates this marvelous spectacle and performance in his own work:

VOZ TRIO	ALEX
–“Tus besos se llegaron a recrear aquí en mi boca, llenando de ilusión y de pasión mi vida loca.	–¿Quieres una mordida?
	AXEL
	–Pero ya sabes en dónde. . .
<b>La recién constituida pareja ríe. Pausa. Súbitamente ensombrecido:</b>	
VOZ TRIO	AXEL
–“Las horas más felices de mi amor fueron contigo;	–Un día me vas a dejar. Lo sé.

Image 1.1 *Adecuación en la obra de Luis Zapata*

Visually re-presenting, what in film is heard and seen simultaneously. The best visual representation of the conglomeration of genres and styles that the work has given us thus far. In this hybridity, Zapata’s work evokes and pulls from the reader’s cultural memory of uber-popular bolero songs that create an audio-visual experience. Luis Zapata essentially includes a soundtrack<sup>19</sup> to his work with the inclusion of musical episodes (see above), but none as radical as the one just presented. Other previous allusions to music

<sup>18</sup> Carlos Monsiváis, in “SE SUFRE PORQUE SE APRENDE”, notes that “En algunos géneros de la música popular el melodrama es una fuerza orgánica. Se teatraliza el espectáculo y un método seguro es usar las canciones como técnica que asigna el papel de los seres que se enamoran, son rechazados, sufren, se alegran de tanto y tanto amor...” (pg. 49)

<sup>19</sup> Explicit song titles that made it into the text include: *Mi gloria eres tú*, *Love is a many splendid thing*, *Contigo*, *Canción del alma*, *White Christmas* (specified to the Bing Crosby version), *Sabor a mí*. Many of these songs are part of a collective cultural memory due to many covers of them, think for example, how many variations of *Sabor a mí* there have been, including renditions in different musical genres. Songs that also circulate outside the nation, building a transnational Latinx culture, a culture that prefigures for both the Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles and *La casa de las flores* chapters.

are by name dropping, whereas in the image just presented, Luis Zapata remediates music with the text. The popularity of his songs selections is so that it is almost impossible to not “hear” them as the viewer/reader encounters the lyrics. *Melodrama* achieves its cultural significance by not only paying homage to Golden Era Mexican melodrama, but by remediating<sup>20</sup> and refashioning other written and audio-visual genres and technologies.

Film intertextuality has been seen before in Latin American literature, for example, in *El beso de la mujer araña* (1976) by Manuel Puig. However, in *El beso*, filmic intertextuality adds to the polyphony of the novel; the filmic references, the bolero songs and the footnotes are meant to complicate the reading experience. In contrast, in *Melodrama* the reader is very much aware of reading a novel but, as I argue, *Melodrama* breaks the reading code leaving the reader with the impression of watching a film at points and reading a novel at other times. The role of the narrator, as mentioned before, is constantly interrupting the text between offering filmic annotations or narrating full scenes without any dialogue from characters, like in Chapter 4. In this chapter, the narrator keeps the overall arch of the story moving forward by connecting the storyline from the previous chapter, forcing the ‘viewer’ of this melodrama to change their ‘viewing’ style; from a ‘filmic dialogue’ to a *relato*. I make use of *relato* since the narrator is telling a story, a story that forces the reader to listen, no longer watching a film. Here the narrator makes it clear to the reader that he is indeed that, a reader.

<sup>20</sup> Term borrowed from *Remediation* (1998) by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin. In their book, the authors theorize that visual media is constantly paying homage and remediating older/other technologies. I.e. photography remediating painting, or television remediating film.

This technique of disruption, of constant interjections from the narrator changes our ‘modes’ of understanding the necessary codes to interpret his work. For example, in Scene 12, the story is unfolding as a *relato* when the narrator informs that while Alex is driving “irán desfilando por su mente imágenes de mujeres que, decepcionadas, engañadas por algún hombre, se entregan a la prostitución ...” (pg. 30) suddenly, the narrator interjects, once again, to remind us that we are now ‘watching’ a film. “Hasta ahora no hemos recalcado la importancia que en el melodrama adquiere el blanco y negro: estando el color más cercano a la realidad, siendo capaz de demostrar con mayor exactitud ciertos matices de la visión...” (ibid.). Not only is the narrator, once again, making us part of the melodrama (hemos), the narrator is also reminding us that we are not only *watching* a film but a very specific kind: black and white film. In true *Melodrama* fashion, once again, the now-viewer is faced with similar filmic annotations:

Vemos:

En primer lugar y en panorámica desde un sitio bastante alto, los muelles, con sus barcos anclados y uno que parte haciendo sonar estruendosamente su sirena, seguido de otros navíos más pequeños que lo acompañan hasta donde termina la bahía.

En un plano general, aunque más cercano vendedores ambulantes ...

En detalle, unas manos que tocan la marimba...

Paneando, pasamos de un bar a otro... vemos hombres y mujeres conversando con animación.. (Zapata, pg. 31)

The narrator/director of *Melodrama* is giving technical camera directions, in a script-prose writing style. *Vemos* a panoramic shot that gives the viewer a ‘big picture’ of the busy and lively bay. As if further zooming in, the viewer now has a closer view of the street vendors ... and then, a close up of hands playing the marimba. Not satisfied with how this film is unraveling, a panning shot is necessary to represent just how lively the

beach city is in “una noche de puerto” (ibid.). Once again, the narrator channels a previous incarnation where the narrator includes the spectator, while giving filmic directions (plano general, paneamos, etc.), constantly including/excluding the reader from the story. Soon after the narrator’s last filmic annotation, the narrator places the viewer at nighttime. The narrator/director, satisfied with the technical filmic directions, and without warning, resumes the *relato* that was interrupted by the script-like instructions.

The narrator, with the ability to constantly break the subject’s code for reading/seeing does not trust the reader’s ability to understand and must *show* how “En el periódico, dentro de un círculo hecho con plumón, destaca el aviso exclusivamente con letras mayúsculas” (pg. 86). This excess play between reader, text, and form creates a comic relief in the spectator of Zapata’s work.

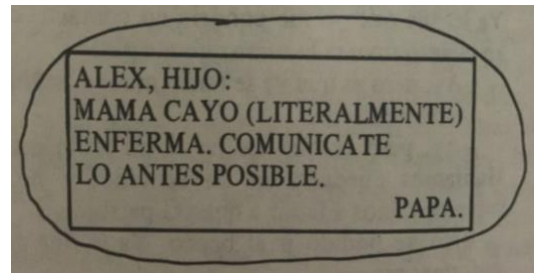


Image 1.2 Visual plays in *Melodrama* by Zapata

In addition to the blend of prose/script style, *Melodrama* creates tension in the writing modes, by constantly mixing, or not following, the punctuation guidelines for film/novel/relato dialogues. In certain scenes/chapters the dialogue is announced with a dash (-Ay, es que estoy muy desvelada manita [pg. 14]) a dialogue that is happening between Alex, the protagonist, and another friend, towards the end of Scene 1. In the following scene, the mother has a monologue with her psychologist with her speech is written in paragraph style, she speaks in quotations (“Muy desvelada, dijo, en lugar de

haber dicho ‘muy desvelado’”) interestingly enough, after the mother ‘talking’ for several paragraphs, the psychologist responds to her with dashes of short dialogue:

-Bueno, pues ojalá y se mejoren las cosas ...-sonríe-... ya me dirá usted la próxima semana.  
-Sí, doctor, gracias -finaliza ella, que se levanta de su acojinado diván y le da la mano. (pg. 16-7)

Even though *Melodrama* is mixing different codes/modes of writing, Zapata does not conform to any genre in particular and chooses to mix all of those codes/modes of writing within each chapter/scene. This creates an innovative ‘novel’ to ‘watch’ forcing the reader/viewer to try and make sense of the style without any intention from the writer to give a code to read his work beyond alluded hints of possibility.

Though *Melodrama* has a plethora of written techniques that can be read as producing a sense for the fluidity of identity, it does not stop at the structuring of the work itself. In addition to the varying modes of the text’s aesthetic strategy, thematically, *Melodrama* subverts the melodrama genre by positioning explicit queer sexuality in the foreground. In *Melodrama*, Luis Zapata writes the story of Alex Rocha y Axel Romero, his detective lover who is hired by Alex’s mother to track his every move. As mentioned before, Ana M. Lopez rescues the female *gender*/sexuality, representations in filmic melodramas, as a form to question and highlight the contradictory discourses in the re-creation of the national, ethnic and gendered identity. While Lopez is right to highlight the representation of femininity on screen as having the potential to question dominant gender norms, Sergio de la Mora analysis of Mexican masculinities (re: heterosexual/homoerotics) questions and critiques the ‘macho image’ by analyzing

Golden Age films that demonstrate different ways of being a man, not just a ‘macho’, a category that according to de la Mora, is always changing, always becoming and potentially queer in its filmic representation. Both Lopez and de la Mora see potential in sexuality and in the analysis of gender representation in these films to further destabilize gender and sex categories. However, in Lopez’ and de la Mora’s examples sexuality is always a theme presented in the background. Zapata, in subverting the genre, in *Melodrama* exalts the break of the traditional family, the saintly mother and sexuality. In *Melodrama*, sexuality becomes what, I believe, most challenges and subverts the melodrama genre for two reasons: first, sexuality is very explicit (and not insinuated like in the films previously mentioned); secondly, queer desires are legitimized as modes of pleasure replacing the typical heterosexual protagonist’s love story.

Historically and literarily speaking, Luis Zapata’s novel *Melodrama*, published in 1983, was born in a transgressive period initiated by what is known as the Mexican *Generación de Medio Siglo*<sup>21</sup>. Many of these authors wrote against “El clero, el Estado, la escuela y la familia... fueron las instituciones que moldearon con mano firme el pensamiento conservador de varias generaciones de mexicanos” (Muñoz [b], pg. 2). These midcentury authors challenged cultural prejudices and taboos, like the strict control of sexuality, in a period of modernity and cosmopolitanism when the failures of the Mexican Revolution were becoming all too apparent, culminating in the Tlatelolco Massacre of 1968. This literature, manifested a more socially-aware writing style,

21 Authors in this generation, among others, began publishing in the 50’s: Octavio Paz (*El laberinto de la soledad*), Juan José Arreola (*Confabulario*), Juan Rulfo (*Pedro Páramo*), Rosario Castellanos (*Balún Canan*), Carlos Fuentes (*La región más transparente*), etc.

preoccupied with denouncing the failures of the revolution, attacks against the corrupt politicians and focusing on personal bodily experience “variantes del erotismo, el ejercicio pleno de los sentidos y las imprevistas reacciones de la naturaleza humana” (Muñoz [b], pg. 4) in which sexuality was a recurring topic. It was during this period that homosexuality proliferated in its cinematic representation, yet the homosexual figure appeared as a laughable character, never to be taken seriously. As a stereotype (reproducing the mockery from *La Fiesta de los 41*) “la voz chillona, el maquillaje ramplón, los ademanes amanerados, los movimientos de cadera y la vestimenta estrafalaria...complemetaban el cuadro de los oficios que desempeñaba [la figura homosexual] como mesero, modismo o peluquero” (ibid., pg. 5). Additionally, early literary text with queer subjectivities were starting to be translated and networked into the US.

Early examples of these types of productions of networks are seen in *Now the Volcano* and *My Deep Dark Pain is Love*, both anthologies of Latin American gay fiction published in 1979 and 1983 by the Gay Sunshine Press. These anthologies translated queer Latin American authors for a US reader translocating, in the act of translating, different forms of queer sexualities and subjectivities. The multinational collection of authors demonstrated a transnational relationship of queerness. These translations were made possible in the US, in part, by the social movements and activism started by the Stonewall Riots of 1969, which politically challenged heteronormativity. These anthologies created, in the years after the Stonewall riots, greater visibility and representations of queerness by translating a menagerie of literary queer subjectivities

from Latin American writers (Perlongher, Puig, Zapata, Arenas, among others) demonstrating a rich array, and different presentation of the homosexual subject. Presentations that go beyond the critical and discriminatory repressive society that would present the homosexual character (always a secondary subject) in three recognizable roles: parodic and laughable, submissive and defenseless victim, or amoral and morbid progeny prone to any excess.

These anthologies demonstrate how homosexuals have been persecuted, victimized and misunderstood, but even then, they are represented as well rounded, fully developed and realized gay subjects ranging from office-workers, soldiers, businessmen, soccer players, etc., Most importantly and in contrast with the re-inscription of demeaning stereotypes of homosexuality noted by Muñoz, the translocating texts gathered in these anthologies humanize and give depth to the homosexual as someone who works, laughs, cries, suffers, hopes. There are examples of unapologetic queer sexualities that can also be seen in Latin American works like *El beso de la mujer araña* and *El lugar sin límites*. In *El beso* and *El lugar*, the queer subjects are embodied as openly queer and fully formed complicated subjects who challenge and defy the normative societies in which they exist. Nevertheless, it is necessary to notice the liminality and periphery of their existence and development: *El beso* has queer sexuality primarily experienced in the jail cell, often in the darkness; in *El lugar* queerness is manifested in the whorehouse, an already peripheral space.

In the case of *El beso*, queer sex(uality) is in confined and illicit space where sex between Molina and Valentín is highly insinuated and implicit: “-Valentín...si querés,

podés hacerme lo que quieras... porque yo si quiero. / -.../ -Si no te doy asco/ -No digas esas cosas. Callado es mejor./ -.../ No se ve nada, nada ... en esta oscuridad./ -.../ Despacio./ -.../-No así me duele mucho/ -.../Esperá, no, así es mejor, dejame que levante las piernas/-.../-Despacito, por favor, Valentin.” This scene demonstrates that homosexual desire, practice and identity are not a problem for Molina since he knows who he is, literally asking to be fucked anyway Valentín wants, even giving how-to instructions. For Valentin, however, his desire, his sexuality is silenced through representation in the ellipsis, pretending to not be in a homosexual encounter ‘callado es mejor’. In *El lugar*, there is a similar approach to (queer) sexuality where La Manuela is a fully realized out queer character and Pancho feels attraction for her/him. In one of the final scenes, La Manuela begins dancing in the whorehouse as Pancho watches “[La Manuela] está bailando para él, él sabe que desea tocarlo y acariciarlo, desea que ese retorcerse no sea sólo allá en el centro sino contra su piel, y Pancho se deja mirar y acariciar desde allá... el viejo maricón que baila para él y él se deja bailar y que ya no da risa porque es como si él, también, estuviera anhelando. Que Octavio no sepa. No se dé cuenta. Que nadie se dé cuenta. (pg. 174) once again demonstrating this idea of hidden/alternative sexuality from the ‘straight’ male characters, in which both Valentín and Pancho want the queer other but cannot seem to reconcile the sexual urges in the normative patriarchal society which they inhabit.

Albeit both works represent fully out and well-rounded queer subjects, in both novels the queer subjects end up dead, diminishing any possibility for queer futurity despite the fully realized queer characters. In contrast, *Melodrama* represents the

homosexual subject and desires as fully out and part of the center, navigating many spaces and aspects of society, no longer quarantined to liminal spaces, as I will show in the last section of this chapter.

### **On Family and Bodily Representations in *Melodrama***

Carlos Monsiváis, in *A través del espejo*, articulates that one of the most obvious conventions that the melodramatic novel re-presents is that of the happy ending “donde la armonía familiar termina por restablecerse después de estar en grave peligro...en el contexto Latinoamericano, el melodrama ha sido el género que gira en torno al desencuentro entre felicidad y tragedia, sea de los individuos, de las parejas, o, de preferencia, de las familias” (pg. 99). This happiness, however, can only be achieved when certain gender codes of behavior follow “un código de conductas y representación casi inamovible. La figura paterna siempre representa el orden y la autoridad; la madre la abnegación y el sacrificio; mientras que los hijos siguen los patrones de acuerdo a su género sexual” (Galindo, pg. 6). From the beginning of *Melodrama* this traditional representation of the family<sup>22</sup> is broken when it is learned that “Tanto el hijo como el padre y la madre ocupan cuartos separados” (Zapata, pg. 12) giving the reader a re-presentation of a ‘modern’ family - no longer a family from the Golden Age films that is unified under the saintly mother’s virtue<sup>23</sup>. A ‘modern family’ where the father is not a

<sup>22</sup> “Issues that have preoccupied drama: the constitution and consolidation of family, the maintenance of the suburban home, the regulation of sexuality, the display and displacement of emotion” (Torres, pg. 283), and as I previously stated, Ana. M. Lopez, also notes that melodramas, in general, tend to focus on the problems of parenting and sexuality.

<sup>23</sup> Juan Carlos Rocha Osornio, in *El espacio torcido* (2015), mentions that “la caracterización de los personajes femeninos del melodrama mexicano...la madre tradicionalmente lucha por encima de todo por salvaguardar la honra y unión familiar” (pg. 113).

strong presence: “En raras ocasiones tendrá oportunidad de hablar; no obstante, parecería que no le hace falta, o que prácticamente no tiene nada que decir” (ibid.), giving the mother figure, Marga, a villainous role for attempting to ‘salvage’ the reputation of her family when she ‘discovers’ her son’s ‘deviance’ and attempts to contain the divulgence of the ‘secret’. In Zapata’s work, the idea of the secret (re: homosexuality) creates the necessary tensions to maintain the story afloat based on Marga’s attempt to “medirse con el discurso del otro, situarlo, comprenderlo y hasta circunscribirlo, respondiendo de tal modo *al otro y frente al otro*.”(Derrida, pg. 46) The mother assumes to understand the *other* based on bodily knowledge of her own persona and understanding, only to demonstrate her limited knowledge of queer embodiment. When the mother overhears - spies on- her son’s conversation with another friend, she encounters “officially” a peek into queer sexuality: “[Alex] -Ay, es que estoy muy desvelada, manita, estoy muy desvelada y todavía tengo que estudiar -dice en el teléfono” (Zapata, 14). Zapata is also very aware of the gender usage in the Spanish language “y pensar que una *a* en lugar de una *o* puede desencadenar tormentas como la que estamos a punto de presenciar. Si nuestros personajes hablaran inglés, este drama nunca se habría iniciado. Por lo menos no de esta manera” (pg. 14). In other words, Zapata plays with gendered writing, an almost impossible technique in English. Thus, the self-feminization of Alex created through language ruptures Marga’s understanding of Alex’s pre-assumed heterosexuality and gender identity. Marga, throughout the novel, becomes obsessed in fixing this revelation by attempting to keep the ‘secret’ in the closet as long as possible since *el que dirán* could damage her image and reputation.

An intriguing aspect is the atypical representation of the mother. As mentioned before, the figure of the mother, in Mexican melodramas, was often venerated, placed on a pedestal as the embodiment of all things saintly, absolutely untouchable (often asexual and submissive). As a mother figure, Marga deviates from the typical representation. Instead “esta madre es egocéntrica, hipocondriaca, lacrimosa, ridícula y exagerada. No ama al hijo ni al marido; no hay mundo más allá que el de su propio sufrimiento” (Tornero, pg. 50) made apparent at the beginning of *Melodrama* when the camera enters her room: “En este cuarto el orden reina: ningún objeto de menos, ningún objeto de mas, o fuera de su sitio. Lo necesario para pasar la noche con comodidad, incluso para el más exigente, y basta” (Zapata, pg. 12), everything precisely controlled to her needs. Further cementing her self-centered status, when Marga visits her psychologist she ‘realizes’ that her son’s homosexuality (as Marga understands it) must be a result of her (in)actions: “Volví entonces a sentirme mal; me dije que, si fuera cierto, yo y sólo yo habría tenido la culpa por no haberlo sabido educar” (ibid., pg. 16). A mother that sees her offspring as a direct result of her (in)abilities to raise them, always a result of her mothering, never acknowledging that they are in fact their own person, with their own mentality and capabilities.

A strong critique of stereotypes and ‘masculine bodies’ soon ensues when Marga tells her psychologist “Alex es alto y fuerte ...un deportista asiduo... un joven dinámico y activo, su condición física parece excelente” (ibid., pg. 14). This demonstrates an ingrained mentality of assuming heteronormativity based on the *visuality* of bodily manifestations. That is to assume that a ‘healthy’ and ‘masculine’ body must equal

heterosexuality. Marga represents a society that links homosexuality to sickness and weakness, but Alex' physical appearance and constitution breaks her previous understanding of (homo)sexuality when he is described as "tiene cierta corpulencia; un muchacho tan sano, que las únicas enfermedades que ha tenido son las que tienen las personas sanas: gripes, catarros, diarrea ... cómo un muchacho tan sano, bien educado, puede ser homosexual." (ibid., pg. 15) where the body -rather its physicality- is thought of having the ability to *tell* and *show* what that body re-presents<sup>24</sup>. In her reading/understanding of homosexuality, Alex 'reads', or can pass as straight due to his 'masculine' traits.

Marga, herself a product of heteronormative society, represents a sector of society that associates homosexuality with male effeminacy, sickness, uneducated and unhealthy psychosis. In Marga's case, her 'understanding' of queer subjectivities through 'reading' of bodily presentation is shattered and deemed outdated when realizing that a 'masculine' body can be homosexual. For Marga, homosexuality seems to be an illness that only affects uneducated (assumed lower economic classes) subjects which is part of the reason for her shock. Considering that sexuality cannot always be *seen* (as the untrained eye can be fooled by 'masculine' male bodies), Marga, as representative of heteronormativity, has her preconceived assumptions of bodily re-presentations shook and questioned since a "masculine body" does not equate to heterosexuality. Marga upholds bourgeois morals in which homosexuality incarnates as *la loca* or *jota*. Although the figure of the mother in

<sup>24</sup> In "The Beast in the Jungle", from her groundbreaking *Epistemology of the Closet*, Sedgwick insinuates that the queer body emerges only after it has been *verbalized*, that is, officially out of the closet. Sedgwick engages with 'masculine' bodies that *look* straight, being this an important factor, passing as straight, or performing 'masculinity' to not be questioned about sexual orientation.

*Melodrama* is unlikeable from the beginning, at the end the novel seems to point to change in the mother's mentality when she allows her son and lover to come to dinner. A hint of futurity for both the queer and the heteronormative characters.

In contrast, the father figure, who briefly appears in only two scenes in *Melodrama*, emerges in the narrative as the glue that attempts to keep the family together, a role typically associated to the mother figure. The novel thus changes the typical family representations familiar from the cinematic melodramas so ubiquitously referenced in this work. Whereas the mother functions as a typical "macho" figure, denying homosexuality, the father becomes the typical *mother* figure that re-consolidates the family bond by forging a re-union between biological mother and son by helping to reshape Marga's perspective: "Déjalo que viva como se le dé la gana. ¿Para qué te andas metiendo? ¿Qué vas a ganar? Déjalo, por una sola vez, que tome sus propias decisiones y defina lo que quiera hacer de su vida." (Zapata, pg. 70). Here, Arturo, the father, becomes the embodiment of the mother-figure who adores and defends her children by attempting to rescue and maintain the ideal unified family image.

In the last scene of the novel, Zapata portrays a happy ending -extremely rare for a queer-themed cultural production- by showing a re-united family, but not without the necessary drama. Set on Christmas day, Marga, in the holiday spirit, accepts her son and her 'friend' (as she is still getting used to the idea of her son dating a man) since "esta es una noche en la que hay que perdonar y compartir lo poco que se tenga con otros seres humanos" (Zapata, pg. 100). Before *Melodrama* ends, Zapata leaves the reader with parents who are willing to put the drama behind. The same cannot be said of the siblings.

When Alex and his sister greet each other with a hug she murmurs into his ear “eres un puto descarado” and he responds “y tú una pobre pendeja” demonstrating the hypocrisy and often contradictory discourses within families<sup>25</sup>. It is important to note that the sister is angry at Alex because his family forgave him despite the drama he caused. Alex decided to get “un avance de la herencia” (Zapata, pg. 95) by stealing some jewelry and escape with his lover to Brazil - their version of a honeymoon. The sister is angry that her brother is forgiven by the parents despite the stealing, and not because he is an openly gay person. To finalize the work, Zapata leaves the reader with the discovery of a new secret, one that is only revealed to the now accomplice reader: “Alex abraza a su apuesto cuñado, quien, como siempre en estas ocasiones, no puede evitar experimentar un ligero y placentero escalofrío al entrar en estrecho, aunque breve, contacto con el atlético cuerpo del joven Alex Rocha” (pg. 101). Here too, explicit sexual discourses question heterosexuality, just like *El beso de la mujer araña* and *El lugar sin límite* previously did. In these works, queer bodies (Molina, La Manuela and Alex, in these cases) tempt and invite ‘heterosexuals’ to break their restrictive heteronormativity, offering a fluid sexuality instead. Although this scene can be read as a return to the closet, in the case of *el apuesto cuñado* who is in a heterosexual relationship, *Melodrama* demonstrates the fluidity of sexuality by questioning the brother-in-law’s sexuality. A queer desire and affectivity the *apuesto cuñado* cannot control.

### **On Queer Sexualities in *Melodrama***

<sup>25</sup> In this case an affluent and upper-class family.

The queer subject of *Melodrama* has a parallel be/coming in both the heteronormative world, represented by the mother Marga, and Alex in his emancipation from the closet. For Alex, his ‘out’ status is made clear during his *jota*<sup>26</sup> talk with his friend over the phone when he says “-Ay es que estoy muy desvelada manita. Estoy muy desvelada y todavía tengo que estudiar” (Zapata, pg. 14) which Marga overhears while she is eavesdropping. This active way of self-feminizing himself offers a clear example of appropriating normative language. No other sexual group practices so frequently the epistemic/oral *transformation* when auto-referencing their gender. The linguistic practice of self-*transgendering* disrupts the normative discourses that marginalizes and maintains the fe/male binary. Instead, this “political promise of the performative” (Butler, pg. 161) inverts the stigma of effeminacy as an insult<sup>27</sup> to normativity by appropriating it and using effeminacy as empowerment, as a political statement to combat both hetero and homonormativity by refusing to conform to gender expectations in both ends that pretend to normalize masculinity as the status quo – despite the ‘masculine’ bodies.

<sup>26</sup> El joteo, or the act of feminizing the language/male self, as defined by Israel Saenz-Sanchez in “Creatividad léxica en una jerga gay de la frontera de México y Estados Unidos” (2009) implies “una marca de participación en el proyecto de la comunidad, calibrada por la familiaridad del hablante con los referentes comunes al grupo. En el caso de los grupos constituidos alrededor de la divergencia sociosexual, este tipo de códigos permiten reformular determinadas realidades que no encuentran cabida en el lenguaje heteronormativo, o que vienen marcadas en dicha norma con valores psicosociales que no son compartidos por los miembros del grupo.” (pg 149)

<sup>27</sup> For example, “Hablador por mi diferencia” by Pedro Lemebel in *Loco Afán*, “Cuerpos para odiar” and “Ni una menos” by Claudia Rodríguez.

Although Alex's initial feminization of the self<sup>28</sup> can be seen as a first contact with homosexuality on Marga's part, Alex be/comes homosexual when Marga invokes and forces his identity to surface in front of her - despite her denial:

“-quiero que me digas la verdad: eres puto o no?

El joven Alex Rocha considera que su madre no tiene derecho a enlodar así su límpida relación con el detective de ojos azul añil. Con dignidad, responde:

-No, mamá; no soy puto. Soy homosexual, que es muy distinto, y estoy enamorado.” (pg. 82)

This act of assuming the homosexual (and not *puto*) identity demonstrates his official coming out to his mother, nevertheless becoming a monstrous subject in her normative eyes. Yet he flips the script for her when he reaffirms a positive identity instead of the derogatory *puto*. A homosexual identity that “materializa lo invisible, y por eso indica otro umbral de realidad de los cuerpos, sus potencias desconocidas pero no por ello no reales” (Giorgi, pg. 324) where the haunting homosexual ghost of Marga's normative world finally materializes. For Marga, the homosexual subject was ‘found’ later in the work, however, Alex was always already homosexual in (t)his *other* world. A world that more often than not ignores and silences queer sexual and bodily expressions. As stated before, sexuality -even heteronormative- has been present in the filmic renditions melodramas, however, it has never been explicit, always implied. As Carlos Monsivais states:

“La carga sexual de una película de cabaret no disminuye por más índices admonitorios que se lancen. En la pantalla, una prostituta camina, una

<sup>28</sup> “Productores de escrituras heterogéneas al presentar realidades y códigos lingüísticos que han sido marginados o invisibilizados por la hegemonía institucional...se levantan y generan como posibilidades expresivas y culturales” (Peña Steel, pg. 162)

rumbera sacude sus partes “innobles” y, al ver lo que anhela, el público incorpora a sus aspiraciones el desfile de labios golosos, caderas amplias, escotes contraídos por la censura y ampliados por el morbo...las insinuaciones se vuelven provocaciones...se extrae de donde se puede la sensualidad.” (Monsiváis, pg. 34)

In *Melodrama la carga sexual* is no longer insinuated, it is readily available to be consumed by the reader. In the novel, sexuality is always presented as not-normative in both the hetero and homosexual scenes. The way sexuality is treated in *Melodrama* demonstrates that the human species is a sexual one which means that sexuality can and does take different roads to achieve pleasure unconventionally. In one example, the narrator informs the reader of how Alex, after a break up “se acostará con todo el mundo, aunque ni siquiera le gusten; será dócil, humilde, adoptará las posturas que le parezcan más indignas, más denigrantes, o, dado caso, más incómodas, obedecerá, se prestará a todo a ser humillado por cualquiera, en convertirse en basura. Será una puta.” (pg. 29-30). Alex’s *joteria* (whom the narrator also feminizes by calling him *puta*) claims his sexual experience and aptitudes as his emergence, as a way to rethink his body and sex, a way to inform and extend his assumed identity, developing his otherness-experience.

In “A liberation of Desire”, Felix Guattari mentions that “liberation will occur when sexuality becomes desire, and that desire is the freedom to be sexual” (Guattari, pg. 211) because he believes that sexuality is “specified as sex, caste, forms of sexual practice, sexual ritual” (ibid., pg. 209). This demonstrates the way sexuality is categorized and boxed in, but (sexual) desire cannot be contained. He believes humans to be ‘*transsexuals*’ because they are always becoming, always transitioning, changing.

Subjects are *transitive* and fluid. This *trans-sexuality* demonstrate the ever-changing always-becoming subjectivity of the homosexual character, where Alex' current identity (be)comes that of *puta*. An identity of desire un-conforming to the dominant models and morals of normativity. Alex becomes a minority subject deterritorializing language and sexual praxis, connecting the individual to politics of sex, gender and sexuality. Alex, after cruising, finds a random man to *putear*<sup>29</sup> and begins feeling "atracción que califica como 'romántica' (puede ser alguien que amezca apuñalado al día siguiente en una de las callejuelas solitarias y oscuras del puerto...alguien que describiría casi ya en estado de descomposición)" (pg. 32) Alex begins to get aroused at the idea of having his murdered body fucked by the stranger he met:

"...baja un poco sus pantalones para dejar al descubierto sus redondeadas nalgas. Por un momento piensa que el extraño podría golpearlo en la cabeza y, ya sin sentido, penetrarlo...Aunque había llegado a la posibilidad de la violencia, e incluso le había atraído, en ese momento el placer está ausente. El otro continúa frotando rabiosamente su sexo contra la cavidad anal del joven" (pg. 33-4)

Not only is there an objectification of the homosexual body (*redondeadas nalgas*), sexuality is also (re)presented as a self-fulfilled fantasy, where each member partaking in the action is disconnected from each other but using each other's bodies for their fantasies. The flirtation between sex and death as a sexual desire is similarly represented in the heterosexual counterpart. The representation of unconventional forms of sexuality and desires is demonstrated by Axel (who later on becomes Alex' boyfriend) and his wife

<sup>29</sup> Defined as the action of actively engaging in sex with multiple partners, not necessarily at the same time.

Estela. In another similarly unorthodox/violent sexual scene, Axel and Estela engage in coitus after eating *lengua* for dinner:

“Su mujer comienza a acariciarle el pene; se lo lleva a la boca por unos instantes. Axel permanece con los ojos cerrados. Ya que ha conseguido la erección, se monta sobre él y solicita:

-Axel, cuéntame cómo encontraron a la chica de Sinaloa.

-En una cajuela -responde-. Estaba atada de manos y pies. Sin duda la habían violado antes.

La mujer se mueve con mayor rapidez. Axel añade, inventando:

-Le habían cortado la lengua, y tenía quemados los pelos de las cejas y las pestañas.” (pg. 44)

It is rather interesting to see how previous to the sex, the couple was having *lengua* for dinner and the dead person's *lengua* reappears as part of the sexual fantasy. A body part that is often erotized in its consumption, yet in this scene, loses all erotic connotations.

Whereas Alex's arousal comes from imagining his dead body penetrated, Axel and Estela *spice up* their sexual life with gory details of a femicide to the point of Axel adding fictitious details to help his wife climax. Such a good husband.

The morbid desire for deadly details/fantasy is found in both hetero/homosexual desires implying it to be a *human* sexual desire that does not strictly belong to homosexuals nor heterosexuals. This form of desire complicates sexuality because sex does not always involve another body, sometimes imagination takes an important role for sexual climax. These forms of desires and sexualities demand to be left un-policed and unregulated by others because they defy classification, they entered a domain of liberation in their unclassifiable domain.

Another milestone for *Melodrama*, published in 1983, is the active representation of unapologetic raw queer sex. A sex that historically has been silenced by the heteronormative regime, but Luis Zapata springs to life:

“Baja el cierre de la bragueta, ensaliva abundantemente su mano y frota con delicadeza el ahora portentoso falo del detective. Con la boca, vuelve a ensalivarlo generosamente y le da ligeros mordiscos en la base. Axel Romero pone los ojos en blanco. Goloso, el joven mete los detectivescos testículos en su boca, mientras con la mano aprieta el enorme priapo.

De pronto, se quita los pantalones, se unta un poco de saliva en el ano y se sienta de un solo y certero movimiento en el órgano viril del detective, como un denodado caballero andante monta de golpe su palafrén favorito -- dame pa dentro, güerito. Dame hasta el fondo, hasta que me toques el corazón... así, papacito; así, así mi amor... mas duro... dale duro, güerito.

Juntos cabalgan en un paroxismo de placer ligeramente mezclado con dolor, hasta llegar, después de hacer enormes esfuerzos por prolongarlo, al anhelado clímax.” (pg. 73)

With this unabashedly queer presentation of sex(uality), Zapata reminds the heteronormative world, that queers do exist, as well as their sex(ualities). Queers create and bring different modes of knowledge that are not secrets, but rather their (hi)stories have been actively silenced by heteronormativity. Queer sexualities penetrate and fissure reproductive functions imposed by the capitalist family model. They create a process that demonstrates a sexual expression that differs from the norm and breaks with hegemonic presentations of sexuality, in both the heterosexual and queer realm, while revealing the excesses of typically represented sexualities that sometimes go beyond the physical realm into imagination. In the process, they create new forms of knowledge-pleasures for those previously ignorant of these particular (hi)stories. The explicit presentation of sexual encounters between homosexuals (in the case of *Melodrama*) function as a way of

creating a historiography of queer (sub)culture by documenting the sexual and erotic practices among queers. Additionally, and most importantly, this graphic (re)presentation legitimatizes and validates queer sexualities to the reader. *Melodrama* uproots the queer subculture from the subversive social order, imposed by heteronormativity, allowing for explicit queer sexualities to function as validation and offering opportunities for self-identification with queer practices.

When it comes to having explicit queer sexuality, not many works engage in the portrayal of explicit queer desires, much less so in a ‘happy ending’ for queer subjects. *Melodrama* reinstates itself as radical in terms of queer representations and the positive portrayal of queer love, an alternative to the always present queer struggles of the coming out, the violence against queers or the aids epidemic and its aftermath. In this novel, Zapata allows the utopian happy ending for queer subjectivities presented as a family reunion in a Christmas dinner. The last scene of the novel shows a reunited family, a family that represents a break from the normative melodrama due to the insertion of the queer couple, Alex and Axel, a queer couple dining in conviviality and harmony – after the initial bickering between siblings. All the while, the novel conceives of sexual orientation as a spectrum, as fluid like with the *apuesto cuñado*. The reader, in this scene, realizes that despite the presentation of a ‘rescued and united family’ ideal – after almost falling apart– the family will never be the same

### **Conclusion**

My reading of *Melodrama* by Luis Zapata has demonstrated that the novel pays homage, while parodying, the cinematographic genre of melodrama. Luis Zapata and his work

question the very notions of sex and sexuality with the insertion of explicit queer sex, demonstrating sexualities that refuse classification but allow for further play and analysis. On one hand, the novel stylistically constructs identity/sexuality as fluid by not following a strict standard for writing, always changing, always becoming, in the process, forcing the reader to *transform*. Thematically, Zapata appropriates the typical melodramatic love story by inserting queer subjectivities and subverting conventional representations of sexual desires both hetero and homosexual.

In addition to the queer plotline, the uniqueness of *Melodrama* lies in the representation of explicit queer sexuality. Sexuality has always been represented as heteronormative (or the *jota* would appear as a secondary character in *fichera* films, but always to contrast to what a *macho* is not supposed to be). Ana M. Lopez rescues female sexuality as a form of female empowerment and a sort of sexual implicitness and Sergio de la Mora demonstrates how these same filmic melodramas can allow for homoeroticism to arise between men – as long as there is a woman mediating. Yet, in these presentations, sexuality has always been insinuated and required imagination from the viewer to imagine what happened next. Luis Zapata's work rescues queer sexuality as a possibility and gives it life by usurping the normally heteronormative presentation of love and allowing queer love and sex(uality) to triumph in his *Melodrama*. Zapata allows for queer futurity to exist by allowing the main queer characters to survive at the end of the novel, in contrast to most queer literature where the queer character often dies.

Whereas the melodrama genre has mostly presented the constitution of heteropatriarchal notions of family and clear-cut notions of sex and gender roles,

*Melodrama* inserts itself as work that defies heteronormative patriarchal family ideals by questioning the very morals that create the family and breaking them down by allowing queer sexuality to penetrate the realms of normativity. *Melodrama* works to demonstrate the falsehood of the gender binary construct and to challenge the constant representations of the dominant heteronormative status as the only viable option for sexuality.

*Melodrama* becomes a work that constantly oscillates between parody and homage, while remediating the filmic and novelistic artifices allowing for queer sexualities to triumph, without fixing sexual identities, but rather allowing and pushing for sexual orientation as fluid. Fluidity of identities impacting the reader/viewer/narrator with constant *transformations*.

*As sissies, butches, and spectacles of high-femme fabulousness, we produce gendered performances of overt desire that rouse discomfort*

-Juana María Rodríguez

*Éste es un lugar de ambiente donde todo es diferente*

-”El Noa Noa” (Juan Gabriel)

*Quiero que me llames joto para que te enfrentes a tus prejuicios*

-Yosimar Reyes

### **Sácalx (del closet): Queer Visibility and Performance in Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Ángeles**

“Somos el Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles, somos el primer mariachi LGBT en el mundo.” As soon as the director of the mariachi Carlos Samaniego finished introducing the Southern-California-based mariachi to the group gathered at the Iglesia Fundadora de la Comunidad Metropolitana de Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>, cheers and applause ensued demonstrating the support towards the queer mariachi. Carlos then proceeded to introduce, with cheering praise, the other members: Allen Magaña, Leandro Orozco, Mayra Martínez, Pablo Juárez, Rodolfo Vasquez, Bryan Espinoza, but when Carlos introduced “a la fabulosísima Natalia Melendez, la primera mujer transgénero en la historia del mariachi” the loudest of cheers, plaudits and whistles demonstrated a united and supporting latinx queer community that is intersected by sexualities, genders, faith, and nationalities. Through multiple interviews with Mariachi Arcoiris’ members and a focus on queer and space theory, this chapter pays close attention to the strong gendered

<sup>1</sup> According to the church’s official website, it is “una iglesia donde todos somos aceptados, sin importar sexualidad, raza, color, donde se celebra el amor incondicional de Dios.”

and sexualized nature of mariachi music<sup>2</sup> in order to answer the following questions: how is queer desire and fantasy created in their transgressive performances? How is the performance of Mariachi Arcoiris disguising, revealing, erasing or dynamizing the space in which they perform? How does queer mariachi performance re-imagine what it means to be queer and what it means to unsettle patriarchal, heteronormative frameworks that are historically associated not only with Latino culture and Chicano activism but indeed socially pervasive across the different ethnic groups that make up the United States of America? In what forms is the performative space constituted and used to intervene and reshape notions of queer homonormativity and heteronormativity?

On December 12th, 2017 Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles performed several songs celebrating “el día de la Virgen de Guadalupe”, one of the busiest days for mariachis. However, given the queer aspect of Mariachi Arcoiris, only the Iglesia Fundadora de la Comunidad Metropolitana de Los Angeles hired them. Due to their unapologetic queer sexualities, many other churches denied them the opportunity to perform in a religious setting. Sexual citizenship privileges heteronormativity which is established through political technologies encompassing legal and cultural constructions that are at once (in)visible and omnipresent<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, queers of color with sexual

<sup>2</sup> See for example Mary Lee-Mulholland’s dissertation titled *Mariachi in Excess: Performing Race, Gender, Sexuality and Regionalism in Jalisco, Mexico* where she engages in the different manifestations of (hetero) gendered and sexualized aspects of mariachi music and performances.

<sup>3</sup> The categories of gender and sex, for example, are social constructions and mechanisms of control which queer bodies constantly contest in a multitude of ways, ranging from everyday performances to manifestations and marches. For more in examples how such constrictions can affect a person refer to two important works: *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993) and *Manifiesto Contrasexual* (Preciado, 2002).

visibility<sup>4</sup>, as cultural producers, are important assets in the process of humanization and normalization of queer sexualities and citizenship. By sexual visibility I mean, unapologetic and raw visibility as a critique of current LGBT politics which puts the community majority's need over the individual's need. Muñoz precisely critiques this form of homonormativity. In "Queerness as Horizon" (*Cruising Utopia*) the author argues how pragmatic homonormative LGBT politics (gay rights, marriage, the gays in the military) limit and narrow the political potential of the queer communities.

These queer sexualities question heteronormativity, ethnicity, inclusivity and nationality. While queerness is accepted among some as part of the human embodiment, for others, hate groups, conservatives, right-wing, etc, queerness or queers are not yet human. Queers are frequently murdered due to fear of difference, ignorance or disagreement of their lifestyles. Normalizing queer sexuality, in turn, would create further visibility (both towards other queers and to hegemonic society) and have the opportunity to be 'legible' and 'political subjects' to the Law. On the other hand, what I am calling unapologetic and raw queer visibility is important to develop inclusive political recognition (as to avoid homonormativity), that is, in order to increment the acceptance in the larger spectrum consisting of the law, the state and, ultimately, the nation.

<sup>4</sup>My usage of queer is as 'non-heterosexual', 'of color' as attention to the intersectionalities of those subjects (gender, sexuality, race and nationality), and 'visible sexualities' as unapologetically and vocally queer.

<sup>5</sup> Lisa Duggan, in "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism", defines homonormativity as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions — such as marriage, and its call for monogamy and reproduction — but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption". (179).

With visibility and the sharing of our lived experiences, we can educate and inform those around us (queer or otherwise). For this reason, our Voice (in the abstract political sense) and our personal voiced stories can be the start for a much-needed change. Just like visibility (in terms of the Law and individual experiences), our audibility is needed to vocalize the problematics within the queer communities but also our voice can be a dominating force for recognition in the political realm of human rights and sexual citizenship. Both visibility and audibility are the catalysts towards the improvement in lawful recognition of queer(ness) in the hopes of diminishing violence towards queer communities. More importantly, our voices and our visibility demonstrate the fact that queerness has been and still is present.

This chapter will focus on the audio-visual stage performance of Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles, who has been around since 2014. The goal is to demonstrate different forms in which notions of Mexicanness are being transferred, appropriated, reworked, reframed and meshed together while queering the space in which Mariachi Arcoiris performs. At times, these queer notions of Mexicanness are sometimes transferred back to México in the constructions and reconstructions of an ever changing Mexican/-/American identity. Mariachi Arcoiris, and their performances, create a sense of community, of belonging, through visibility and explicit sexuality while working on the community's queer futurity. The aim is to demonstrate how this mariachi group queers the performative stage/space in its vocal/sexual performance as well as the queer-erotic elements that manifest in the affective reception and interaction with the audience in the mariachis' performative space that allows for further inclusion of the queer

experience, a queer experience that goes beyond the typical homonormative representation.

### **Queer is here (and there, and everywhere)**

José Esteban Muñoz (*Cruising Utopia*) argues that “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put it in another way, we are not yet queer” (pg. 1) but I disagree. Queerness is here, the materiality of his book and the (hi)stories contained within the chapters are proof of that. Being queer does not imply that one must ‘be’ a certain way. Rather, queerness can refer to pluralistic embodiments. It defies one ‘ideality’, or a predefined way of being queer, instead it demonstrates multiple forms of queer incarnations. The multiple histories, forms and embodiments of nonconforming sexualities that Muñoz highlighted are proof that queerness has existed and will always exist in a multitude of forms, never constricted to one way of being queer. Queer identities are always changing refusing to be pigeon holed into one form, although queer expression is necessarily restricted by historical and social constrictions. Muñoz is right, however, when he argues that, the current pragmatic LGBT politics focuses on the sexual citizenship of homonormativity. LGBT politics struggles on the fronts of gay rights, gay marriage, the military, for “normative citizen-subjects with a host of rights only afforded to some (and not all) queer people” (pg. 20). Yet these predominant efforts forget - or avoid - the forms of queerness that fall out normativity.

My analyses builds on Muñoz’s work which had complicated Jack Halberstam’s definition of ‘straight time.’ Halberstam defined straight time as “normative logic and organizations of community, sexual identity [heterosexual], embodiment and activity in a

space and time” (pg. 54). Muñoz took this notion of ‘straight time’ to pinpoint current queer politics, where “traditional straight relationality, especially marriage, for gays and lesbians announces itself as a pragmatic strategy when it is in fact a deeply ideological project that is hardly practical.” (pg. 21). Muñoz argued that this strategy is narrow minded and limiting the queer spectrum of embodiments by ignoring the political needs of those who do not subscribe to normativity. My approach agrees with this critique of ‘Straight time’ since much of the LGBT struggle recreates a heteronormative framework by importing normative ideology into the queer communities. In other words, the struggle for LGBT rights risks ‘straight washing’ queerness and blunting its potential to unsettle gender (hetero and homo) normativity in more profound ways. Both Halberstam and Muñoz see ‘straight time’ as the reproduction of conventional and compulsive heteronormativity with the goal of keeping the ‘family’ ideal as the most important ideology, which maintains the heterosexual familial narrative of the nation.

In contrast, a ‘queer time’ implies a deviation from that mentality by “leaving the bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety and inheritance” (Halberstam, pg. 54). Queer sexualities threaten the reproduction of the ‘family’ in ‘straight time’. Both Muñoz and Halberstam critique homonormativity, or what Muñoz calls the ‘good subject’ who ‘chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms’ (Muñoz, pg. 11b) thus the ‘good subject’ becomes the ‘good homosexual’ who “is characterized by the focus on stability, monogamous relationships and financial independence, which inevitably produces the good homosexual as affluent and middle-class”, as opposed to the “‘bad homosexual’ [who] is characterized as hypersexual and

promiscuous, a sexual threat and danger” (Binnie, pg. 13-4). Given that sexuality is a difficult, if not impossible, thing to control<sup>6</sup>, it has always been a threat when sexuality is explored/experienced in manners that contradict ‘straight time’.

Homonormativity includes the ideological project of simulating, or assimilating, ‘heterosexual time’ by making marriage and family an ideological priority. Sara Ahmed notes queers “miming the forms of heterosexual coupling, hence pledge their allegiance to the very forms they cannot inhabit” (pg. 154). In other words, the simulation of ‘straight time’ is an assimilation to an ideal that necessarily excludes queer subjects. Queers who refuse such incorporation, in turn, are rendered unimportant under the homonormative gaze. That is to say, when the queer subjects are not normative there is a double exclusion from both the hetero and homonormative gaze. Homonormativity reproduces heteronormativity by subordinating the multiplicity of queerness, deeming relevant only those that imitate heterosexual compulsion of normativity, coercing other forms of queerness as excess or abjection. For this reason, it is important to note the Visibility and Voice derived from what I am calling *unapologetically raw queer sexualities* since they demonstrate the pluralities of queer existence.

Forms of raw unapologetic queerness and labor towards queer futurity can be seen in the performances of Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Ángeles. Mariachi Arcoiris has a unique ensemble encompassing mariachi musicians that identify queer coming together to perform traditional Mexican regional music in an otherwise machista and

<sup>6</sup>In California, same sex marriage was allowed officially in 2004. However, during the November 2008 ballot, Proposition 8 attempted to protect the institution of marriage by defining marriage as between a man and a woman. Although at the time the proposition passed, it was deemed unconstitutional in 2010.

discriminating mariachi world. Their outspokenness of their queerness in a machista job market, is creating a much-needed noise.

### **Mariachi's history, *herstory* and *theirstory***

Media had a crucial role in the popularization of the mariachi. During the 1930s, radio and cinema came of age in México, launching mariachi y 'lo mexicano' to national and international prominence. The perceived construction and representation of 'Mexican identity', as mentioned in my previous chapter, was showcased in Mexican Golden Age melodramas. Golden Age melodramas thrived on close-ups of their protagonists and helped to establish a vibrant star system that further popularized the mariachi musical genre while heightening the 'entertainment' value of many films (Lopez)<sup>7</sup>. It was through the musical representation in cinema that the value of music and performance became a political ideology, often, displaying national characteristics, while at the same time, demonstrating cultural antinomies. Despite women participating in the filmic representation of mariachi, the musical genre became highly associated "with drinking, melodramatic sentimentality, fiestas and cowboys" (Mulholland, pg. 235). Then as now, the majority of mariachi bands are comprised of mostly all-male ensembles.

Yet, the rancheras that mariachis often perform, are cultural sites where ideas and values "are displayed, transmitted, produced, reproduced and contested" (Nájera-Ramirez, pg. 188), which is why female performers of rancheras were often seen as transgressive in their performances. For example, Lucha Reyes' (1906-1944) unconventional performances disrupted essentialized ideals of femininity (Mexican

<sup>7</sup> Actors and singers like Flor Silvestre, Chavela Vargas, Lucha Reyes, Lucha Villa, Lola Beltrán, Pedro Infante, José Alfredo Jiménez, Jorge Negrete, Antonio Aguilar, etc.

femininity in this case) since she refashioned traditional behaviors. In ‘Queening/Queering Mexicanidad’, Marie Sarita Gaytán and Sergio de la Mora note how Reyes was often criticized for her ‘unlady like’ performance, effectively bending gender.<sup>8</sup> They argue that some of Reyes’ performances “consciously critiqued the hegemonic ideology of romantic heterosexual love, made legible same-sex desires, and forged alternative ways of expressing female subjectivity” (pg. 199) giving a first glimpse at the disruptive potential and power of mariachi performance. Gender conventions that many contemporary and popular artists continue to disobey like Juan Gabriel, Astrid Hadad and Chavela Vargas, to mention a few<sup>9</sup>.

Just as mariachi performances in México were questioning gender and sexuality, the US, in the 1950s and 60s, benefited when varios grupos de mariachi<sup>10</sup> emigraron a Los Angeles creando una meca para la cultura del mariachi. Entre esos grupos inmigrantes, estaba el grupo Los Camperos de Natividad “Nati” Canto. En 1961, Nati organizó Los camperos, “which became the best-known U.S. mariachi and the country's pioneer group in popularizing this music among non-Hispanics” (Clark, pg. 2). De hecho, La Fonda Los Camperos (founded by Nati in 1961), un restaurante en Los Angeles, sigue siendo muy conocido for showcasing mariachi groups. Mariachi players will often go there after their gigs to appreciate other mariachis. El mariachi Los Camperos de Nati

<sup>8</sup> Her gender bending performance was partly made possible after her voice got deeper and huskier after recovering from a throat infection (Gaytán, De la Mora)

<sup>9</sup> It is important to note that although cinematic performances (like that of Lucha Reyes) differs from live performances in terms of the way they create politics, this chapter focuses on live performances of Mariachi Arcoiris and will not be engaging on filmic/screen performances/reception of the recordings.

<sup>10</sup> Since Mariachi Arcoiris involves notions of language (Spanish and English) y performatividad, este capítulo will be written en una mezcla de ambos idiomas interchangeably, without italicizing ni una ni otra as to insinuate a continuum de una ‘identidad’ que no es fija, but rather, siempre-changing and always yendo-y-viniendo. This written performance sirve como metáfora de esa performatividad de las lenguas con las que también juega el Mariachi Arcoiris.

Cano (considered among the top three mariachis of the world<sup>11</sup>) was one of the backing mariachis for Linda Ronstadt's mariachi album *Canciones de mi padre* (1987) which is "the biggest-selling foreign-language album ever in the United States" (Arellano).

Despite the popularity of mariachi in the US, and even popular female singers like Linda Ronstadt, mariachi music has been composed by mostly men. A few exceptions to the mostly male mariachis are of course all-female mariachis, one such example is Flor de Toloache (started in 2008) whose *Las Caras Lindas* just won a Latin Grammy for "Best Ranchero/ Mariachi album". In addition to their gender transgression en el género musical, está el hecho de tener una agrupación multicultural "con raíces no sólo en México, Puerto Rico, la República Dominicana y Cuba, sino también hasta Australia, Colombia, Alemania, Italia y Estados Unidos." (Brooks, pg. 2) Their songs deal with the intersectionality of female gender and race<sup>12</sup>.

To contrast the political engagement of Mariachi Flor de Toloache, Mariachi Arcoiris<sup>13</sup> adds queer sexuality to the arsenal of transgressions against the traditionalism of the mariachi genre in both México and the US. Rancière, en *Wrong: Politics and the Police* menciona que "The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying...it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that

<sup>11</sup> The other two mariachis are Mariachi Vargas de Tecatitlán and Mariachi Sol de México.

<sup>12</sup> In Leticia Soto Flores' dissertation, *How Musical is Woman?: Performing Gender in Mariachi Music*, she further analyzes female gender performance in mariachi music.

<sup>13</sup> Since Mariachi Arcoiris involves notions of language (Spanish and English) y performatividad, este capítulo will be written en una mezcla de ambos idiomas interchangeably, without italicizing ni una ni otra as to insinuate a continuum de una 'identidad' que no es fija, but rather, siempre-changing and always yendo-y-viniendo. This written performance sirve como metáfora de esa performatividad de las lenguas con las que también juega el Mariachi Arcoiris.

this speech is understood as discourse and another as noise.” (pg. 22) Así, la policía es quien está a cargo de la creación de cuerpos legibles y, por consiguiente, también designa quién sí o quién no forma parte de estos cuerpos legibles. Debido a las pautas designadas, todxs aquellxs sujetxs que difieren de la norma se tornan ilegibles. En este caso, se trata de una legibilidad ante una heteronormatividad discursiva. In the case of Mariachi Arcoiris, their ‘noise’ becomes legible when they perform politics of visibility in the realm of Latinx. Mariachi Arcoiris appropriates mariachi music with queer sensibilities, penetrating spaces where sex and sexuality are regulated in a mostly heteronormative fashion, depending on location. The group’s diversity grounds individuality while reshaping tradition in the creation of cultural ties within the *communities* (Mexican/American and Queer).

The mariachi, having its work based in the Los Angeles county, markets itself as “the world’s first and only LGBTQ mariachi” joining both seemingly opposite identities: queer and mariachi. Mariachi Arcoiris counters the machismo of ‘traditional’ mariachis by queering the space in their visibility and performativity. The act of appropriating this genre of music with a queer twist allows for identification and interaction with other members of the queer communities, communities that have always maintained a precarious relationship with heteronormative lyrics present in the mariachi songs.

By early 2000s, Carlos Samaniego said he came out while being a music student at Cal State Los Angeles<sup>14</sup>. As a result, he joined the campus LGBT activist group. As a manifestación y protest, the activist group planeó una mock wedding entre dos personas

<sup>14</sup> The following account and quotations are based on a phone interview I conducted with Samaniego on November 3, 2017.

del mismo género for a pride event debido a que el matrimonio gay no era legal en aquel entonces. Fue en esa mock wedding dónde “a mí se me ocurrió y sería espectacular si el mariachi era gay”, as a one-time performance, “ya que era una boda mexicana tradicional, tenía que haber mariachi”. As the idea of a gay mariachi further developed in his mind, Carlos proceeded to think “en todas las personas que conozco que son gay que tocan mariachi y entre las amistades se formó el grupo”. Since mariachi culture and networks are concentrated in the LA area, la búsqueda se facilitó entre las conexiones de la comunidad del mariachi. If Carlos didn’t know the gay musician firsthand, among his acquaintances and contacts’ friends, he was able to gather up the necessary musicians to play a *different* version of the typical mariachi. That of an all self-identified gay mariachi. Si el evento de un matrimonio gay creó commotion within the pride event, con la idea de un ‘all-gay mariachi’ performing se popularizó aún más el evento. No solamente hubo awareness dentro del campus, sino que se escandalizó y se exteriorizó el evento creando aún más visibilidad en la ciudad de Los Angeles. Fue tal la popularidad de la boda/mariachi que semanas before pride week “empezaron a promover con flyers”. Finally, el día tan esperado de la mock-boda llegó con cientos de personas presentes. Carlos mentioned how among the attendees en el día del evento was the manager of the still-popular Tempo club (a gay latin vaquero theme) in West Hollywood. “El gerente fue y en el momento que dejamos de tocar me ofreció trabajo y le dije que sí y pues llevé el mariachi ahí, tocábamos dos días a la semana y empezamos a tener trabajos”. Aunque el primer intento del Mariachi Arcoiris tuvo relative success in its inception, el grupo duró menos de un año ya que Carlos “era muy joven y no tenía experiencia como director y

aún estaba en la escuela”. Después de que el mariachi se desarmó, Carlos remained tocando mariachi in other groups but “siempre tenía en el fondo eso, de algún día voy a tener el Mariachi Arcoiris”.

Carlos, tired of the machismo and homophobia he encountered en los otros grupos con los que tocaba, decided to put an end to “the total machos, [who] would tell me I wasn't good enough to represent this music”. Esta reacción hacia la negatividad del machismo en la música del mariachi fue one of the catalysts to create “a haven for people who identified as LGBT in the mariachi world to play the music we love and not be made fun of, not be talked down to because of how we look, how we act, who we go to bed with”. Several years later after that first inception of Mariachi Arcoiris, the group rose from the ashes. En el 2014, el día de San Valentín, Carlos had his first gig as Mariachi Arcoiris again. But this time con más experiencia, con más madurez, with a more stable life that allowed for undivided attention a su sueño: el Mariachi Arcoiris. Parte de la razón para recrear el grupo fue para no tener que dividir su identidad queer y su identidad de mariachi. Con la idea final de tener una community de música where others who identified as both queer and mariachi musicians can be themselves, sin tener que escoger ni una ni otra identidad but also to allow queer audience member to relate more to the queered lyrics in their performance. Most importantly, this blending of identities allows for further queer visibility in the mariachi's performance.

The mariachi genre está dominado por el machismo que emana en la letra de las canciones. Un claro ejemplo es el amor posesivo en la canción “La media vuelta”, hecha famosa por el patriarca mejor conocido como José Alfredo Jiménez en la cual canta “Te

vas porque yo quiero que te vayas / A la hora que yo quiera te detengo / Yo sé que mi cariño te hace falta / Porque quieras o no / *Yo soy tu dueño*". Otro ejemplo que mezcla machismo<sup>15</sup> and homophobia occurred in the aftermath of a concert. Tras terminar su dueto, Vicente Fernandez y su hijo Alejandro Fernandez concluyen el número musical con un beso<sup>16</sup> en la boca (en el escenario), desatando así un sinfín de reportajes cuestionando la masculinidad de ambos símbolos sexuales.

In contrast, el Mariachi Arcoiris challenges that notion of tradición by appropriating the genre and allowing for queer sensibilities to emerge in the reinterpretation of the lyrics. Promoting inclusivity for the queer audience (when present) to identify culturally in a deeper fashion con el joteo de la letra, with queer lyrics that allow for lesbian desires to emerge when sung by a queer woman, for example. Cuando no hay cuirs en la audiencia, el simple hecho de vocalizar y actuar las serenatas homosexuales crean política.

<sup>15</sup> *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (2006) by Sergio de la Mora, explores representations of masculinity (whether heterosexual or not) that destabilize, denaturalize and defamiliarize the institutions and practices that make gender. De la Mora demonstrates how homosexuality has always been part of the macho image present(ed) in cinema. Masculinity can be said to be an identity that is constantly changing, forming, becoming a new iteration in each representation, an always visible power system. The author notes that Mexican films inform the understanding of how proper men must "look, think, feel, express themselves." (pg. xiii) a dominant image that gets questioned with *compadrismo* in 'buddy comedies' when disguised homoerotic tendencies are revealed. According to De la Mora, *compadrismo* and its homoerotics question three things primarily: a crisis in Mexican patriarchy, the 'macho' image, and a crisis in the film industry.

<sup>16</sup> For further analyzes on the relationship of idealized masculinity and mariachi music and (dis)identification refer to "*Mariachi, Myths and Mestizaje: Popular Culture and Mexican National Identity*" by Mary-Lee Mulholland en el cual la autora hace un análisis entre los Fernandez.

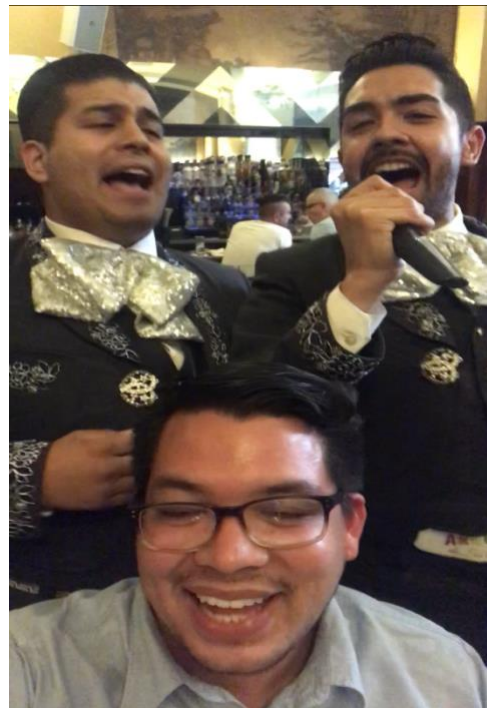
### **E-motion: el joteo in motion**

El joteo de la letra is only available since Mariachi Arcoiris presents themselves como un mariachi queer before starting to play, and when they sing gender neutral songs de desamor, where the subject of desire in the song is 'tú' - always an implied female subject - the song changes meaning when an openly queer male or female is singing el desamor. The gender neutral 'tú' allows for the multiplicity of queer identities to surface, where the object of desire is not always an assumed heterosexual subject. Even if the implied heterosexual female subject in 'tú' is still present, an added layer of complexity is achieved by intensifying the hopelessness of the amor expected if the singer is female. Escalating el desamor effect of the singer for falling for a straight and impossible love. Additionally, when the lyrics do happen to be gendered and the singers don't change the lyrics, respetando la letra original, a queer effect is created, depending on the gender of the singer. The affectivity of this queer rendering avows an extrinsic emotional response from the queer crowd (when present) by having a same-sex desire in the singing. This impact is partly due to el Mariachi Arcoiris having access to multiple forms of cultural public spaces where the queer bodies affect those present, at times creating a discomfort in the heterosexual audience. Yet this discomfort is una señal de las diferentes maneras en las cuales el Mariachi Arcoiris penetra espacios normativos forjando espacios for queer sensibilities to surface more prominently not only in their performance but also in the reception.

Mariachi Arcoiris' performances create possibilities of changes and critiques when they reframe the conventions and norms of mariachi music/performance.

According to Diana Taylor “performances operate as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory and a sense of reiterated actions” (pg. 6), thus, performances also imply el acto de being acted on (como receptores del performance) lo cual demuestra los límites de las condiciones y las posibilidades del actor (los que performean). Es justo en este proceso de ser “acted on” donde el Mariachi Arcoiris crea cambios ya que las ‘reglas implícitas’ de las convenciones del evento cambian al involucrar un mariachi que no sigue las pautas heteronormadas. Sino al contrario, Mariachi Arcoiris “recontextualize, resignify, react, challenge parody, perform, and reperform differently... an aesthetic act, a political intervention” (Taylor, ch. 4). The affectivity and e-motional reception intensifies when the singers engage in same-gender serenata because a queer serenata will never happen in a traditional mariachi/setting.

I, for once, was pleasantly surprised the first time I went to see Mariachi Arcoiris perform at Más Malo, in downtown Los Angeles, a family restaurant. Not only was I impressed with their amazing vocals and OUT showmanship, pero también porque ¡me trajeron serenata! Los guapotes de Allen and Leandro (two men! TWO MEN!) me cantaron “Hermoso cariño” (Ver Imagen 2.1, right) making me fluster, giggle, embarrass, arouse, forgetful (I was there to analyze) ...sigh...



*Image 2. 1. Leandro (left) and Allen (right) performing Hermoso Cariño. Más Malo, 2017.*

very much an unforgettable and positive queer experience. Although I was highly aware of their performance and the fantasy they were selling, I pretended it was real. Because it was real, and no one will convince me otherwise. Uncontrolled and unexpected affective reactions like mine were typical from the queer audience when sung to, debido a la alta probabilidad que para ellxs también era la primera vez que les dedicaban una serenata, y a falta de costumbre, no supimos reaccionar “propiamente” without making fools of our emotional selves when the mariachi attention was on us.

Yet, those three minutes y x segundos que duró la serenata made me feel welcomed, acknowledged, wanted, belonging to a community that accepts me for who I am, for the desires and pleasures that my queer embodiment entails, all thanks to the space Mariachi Arcoiris creates in their performances, especially when that space is regulated under heteronormative regulations, like a family restaurant. If I, an openly out and proud queer, felt empowered by them, can you imagine how someone, who might be in the closet, or is barely exposed to their own queerness, will feel at the sight of positive queer presentation of hope, happiness and futurity of/for their queer self? Mariachi Arcoiris not only links two seemingly opposite identities: their own queerness and mariachi music. Lo hacen de una manera más auténtica para ellxs al representar deseos y sexualidades queer en la música y en la performance al crear un sentido de comunidad dentro del grupo musical y en el espacio performativo. In hindsight, and recovering my analytical purpose, the performance raises important questions that I will seek to answer in more depth in the following section: How are Mariachi Arcoiris’ presentations going beyond ‘masculine’ and ‘femenine’ musical performance? In what forms does the

Mariachi Arcoiris play with the social constructions, of gender in this case, that may affect the ways in which people perceive themselves in their culture? How is Arcoiris transmitting new forms of knowledge through their musical performances? But most importantly, in what forms is the ‘queering’ of the mariachi music creating political change for an improved queer futurity?

### **Pledging allegiance to the (rainbow) f(l)ag: On becoming the Arcoiris family**

En términos de los inicios y la experiencia con la música del mariachi, the members of the mariachi seem to have a fairly similar upbringing and exposure. Si no es alguien en la familia que ya tocaba en un mariachi that introduced them al estilo de música, fue en un programa de música en High School que les dió inicio en la trayectoria del entretenimiento y performance. Once they had the ability to perform in a mariachi group professionally, one challenge several of the Mariachi Arcoiris’ members faced before joining the current mariachi is that of performing musically ‘straight’. This ‘straight’ performance was accentuated by singing to women ya que la música “tradicional” de mariachi is all about evoking and conveying heteronormative emotionality. A tradition that many of the members struggled to convey because “those two parts of me [queer sexuality and mariachi] formed by each other but they never really felt in harmony<sup>17</sup>” as Allen Magaña (violinist and singer) puts it.

Don Allen (de cariño) joined Mariachi Arcoiris in September 2017. Being a younger generation of queer, he faced less discrimination for his sexuality in his personal life than the older band members. However, the same cannot be said in his performances

<sup>17</sup> Magaña’s quotes were recorded while having dinner/interview on November 10, 2017.

in ‘traditional’ mariachis. Prior to Mariachi Arcoiris, when it came to playing music at private events (backyard parties, birthdays, etc), los asistentes piden canciones y varias veces they would request canciones sung originalmente by women (Paquita la del Barrio, Rocio Durcal, por example) even though there were no females in the mariachi. This request of songs created tension in the group at times due to the nature of the inquiries, but since the mariachi does not want to ruin its reputation by not singing requested songs, tienen que complacer la demanda. Once at a party, a person requested la famosísima canción “Rata de dos patas” de Paquita la del Barrio. Since Allen knew the song, he sang it. Considering Paquita la del barrio, the original singer, is a woman, Allen felt a tension in his performance where Allen questioned “am I doing mariachi drag?” in his interpretation of the requested song. This subsequently became a challenging problem. He asked himself whether he should ‘camp it up’ or simply sing the song without theatrics. When Allen performed la canción it got a little out of hand when he delivered the infamous “¿me estás oyendo, inútil?” line to a man in the crowd. As Allen recounts, “the women in the crowd got a kick out of it and the man got pissy and uncomfortable and the director of the group just said to try and get the girls to sing with me and to tone it down”. Clearly, the ‘drag performance’ of a ‘traditional’ song can have negative repercussions for the performer in a highly normative space, a heteronormative space that requires men to sing to women.

Although the original intention was not to ‘queer’ the song, Allen was respecting the original lyrics and the form in which Paquita always delivers her famous line to men when performing su canción icónica. Allen’s delivery of the infamous line to a man

queered the space with its performance by having a man singing to another man and adding insult —just like Paquita would— to the emasculated spectator. This encounter sprung questions of delivery and reception to a heteronormative audience. The queer presentation incomodó al sujeto, demostrando cómo los efectos y afectos queer de una performance pueden tener reacciones negativas, y pueden escalar a la violencia. Sin embargo, es justo ese discomfort that demonstrates the potentiality of unapologetic queer sexualities al incomodar y crear cambios. Afortunadamente, el performance no pasó a mayores, sin embargo, there had to be a policing of the queer effects when the director asked him to ‘tone it down’.

Whereas some problemas arose cuando Allen le cantó a un hombre, another set of performance issues would arise cuando la canción requería de llevar serenata a una mujer. Allen would “perform from a distance” ya que era demasiada actuación y falsedad intentar deliver a ‘straight’ performance. As such, Allen prefería enfocarse en dar una buena interpretación de la canción —sin dedicatoria. Mariachi singers are very much aware of the reception of their performance since that is part of their job. Por lo tanto, if they feel a song won’t be sung con corazón when performed to a gender they are not interested in, they rather interpretar la canción. Sin embargo, this delivery ‘from a distance’ caused Allen to receive critiques from the other mariachi members by denoting his performance as ‘too serio’. His performance demonstrates several tensions between the performance and the reception of the songs. On the one hand, their job como mariachi es convencer con la pasión de los sentimientos de la canción and its delivery. Por otra parte, está la recepción de la audiencia y la verosimilitud con la que se conlleva la

interpretación. Evidently, there is a clear tension between Allen-as-queer-person and Allen-as-mariachi-musician. When does the Allen-person end and where does the Allen-Mariachi begin? Can these identities be separated? What types of Latinx cultural and sexual knowledges are being produced or put in tension in the interpretations and performances?

It can be said que una vez que el traje está puesto, the mariachi persona emerges. From the interviews, I gather a sense of dichotomy in the mariachi performers. On the one hand, there is the Subject-Person and on the other there is the Subject-Musician, two sides to the same coin. Esta deducción y dicotomía de Persona/Músico se hacen claras en las performatividad ‘heterosexual’ de los ejemplos anteriores. En un mariachi ‘tradicional’ la división de queer and musician está controlada bajo las reglas del mariachi that must be followed<sup>18</sup>. Es decir, se tiene que respetar el traje ya que there is an image to uphold, an image de honor. Por esta razón, los mariachis siempre están en full outfit otherwise “the other mariachis won't talk to you because you are not respetando el traje” as Allen explained. Es decir, con la música de mariachi hay cierta imagen, ciertas reglas, cultural aspects and tropes que se deben seguir ya que se está vendiendo justo eso, una fantasía, una idea de que el mariachi te viene a buscar para cantarte, viene a expresar sus sentimientos por ti. Esto se afectúa por medio del performance de mariachi, the embodied practice, ya que el mariachi se puede reconocer como tal debido a los actos de repetición.

<sup>18</sup> One such example is the ‘traditional’ female mariachi presentation includes hair pulled back, not too many accessories, long skirts. However, there are groups of all female mariachis that are challenging this ‘traditional’ presentation of femaleness, by wearing short skirts, or colorful outfits. Ver por ejemplo, Flor de Toloache (who are known for wearing pants instead of skirts). <http://soldemexicomusic.com/about/jose-hernandez-guide-for-a-professional-mariachie/>

Como es de esperar, parte de la problemática surge por reglas impuestas y la ideología del mariachi durante una época en la cual la “heterosexualidad” era lo esperado de todxs lxs cantantes de mariachi, donde “men have the authority to legitimately perform the music while establishing a normative standard of dress, musical style, and conduct” (Soto Flores, pg. 49) thus leaving the possibility of queerness out of the equation when the rules were implemented. Debido a ello, y como será evidente en los siguientes ejemplos con lxs otrxs miembrxs, siempre hay una tensión entre lo queer, gender, el performance y la música. Siempre navegando y controlando their queerness, especialmente su aspecto, when performing heteronormative mariachi music albeit the queering of lyrics.

Whereas Allen’s performance de “Rata de dos patas” brings up tensions between la precaria línea de división between Subject-Person and Subject-Singer on stage, the performance also manifested the problems that a ‘drag’ performance can create in the audience. I bring up the dichotomy of everyday-person and musician-person since the interviewees often spoke about themselves in different aspects/intersections of themselves, for example the ‘normal’ day-to-day person y la persona de mariachi. One such example of a blurry division can be seen in the performance of “Bésame mucho” by Rodolfo ‘Rudy’ Rodriguez which complicates the tension between persona and performer. During our interview<sup>19</sup>, Rudy mentioned that he came out at a later stage in life, dealing with homophobic pressures in the community he grew up in. For Rudy, mariachi music “is a way to connect to my roots, my histories, my family” which is one

<sup>19</sup> Las citas del señor Rodriguez provienen de una entrevista hecha via telefónica el siete de noviembre del 2017.

of the reasons he takes his performances very seriously. Rudy highly disliked and found disrespectful when ‘traditional’ mariachis perform ‘faggotry’. Me comentó que muy comúnmente “when singing Juan Gabriel songs they would do what my friends and I call ‘faggotry’ which is when they camp up the gay mannerisms for cheap laughs” pero él nunca participaba dentro de eso debido a la falta de respeto a su propia sexualidad, pero más importante, a la falta de respeto a unx de lxs canta-autores mexicanxs más reconocidxs. Ésta tensión de queer affectivity in performances se manifiesta aún más con Rudy ya que él does not “identify with gay culture”. Rudy’s comments harshly bring to light the power of homonormativity, the idea that there is only one ‘gay culture’. Indeed, a recurring problem that is very often brought up with queers. Considering the limited representation of queerness, often we feel like we do not belong in a queer community (gay in this example). Queers often fail under the pressures to satisfy the ‘am I gay/queer enough?’ checkboxes. In Rudy’s case, he felt he did not ‘meet the requirements’ for gay culture identification —whatever idea he had of ‘gay culture’. His discomfort and dis-identification demonstrate the need to expand the notion of queerness as pluralistic and not as uniform. This tension is rather intriguing since Rudy, as he mentioned, does not identify with ‘gay culture’, yet his queer performance can have convincing queer effects/affects on the audience. Antes de Mariachi Arcoiris, Rudy no cantaba en los mariachis; sólo a partir de su incorporación a Arcoiris empezó a desarrollarse como cantante. Rudy menciona que el coquetear con guys while performing is “a show and as a performer I can satisfy the crowd”. Thus, the audience can forget that it is a performance after all, demonstrating that the audience is also an active receptor of the performance,

“the efficacy of performance depends on the acknowledgement/agreement of those in attendance...performance constitutes a means of communication, a doing, and a doing *with* and *to*” (Taylor, np.). This active performance *with* and *to* is where mariachi codes are often broken when performed by the queer aspect of Mariachi Arcoiris since their performative space is never neutral instead it is always “discursively constructed, ideologically marked, and shaped by the dominant power structures and forms of knowledge” (Wrede, pg. 11) in any given space.

The performance of “Bésame mucho” occurred as a gift for the birthday person, for which Rudy started “being flirty with him, and he takes it too literal, some people understand it’s a show, but he thought that I was really into him... he thought that I wanted him” which brings up the issues of receptivity and queer fantasy for the audience. A space that this performance created, was a space that was previously not possible outside of the queer mariachi. An imagined and temporary space that allows for queer sexualities and sensitivities to arise, reminding the spectators of the mariachi performances of queer sexualities and their existences. Mariachi Arcoiris and ultimately the space the queer performance creates is the “dream and enact[ment of] new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds” (Muñoz, pg. 1). Clearly, the birthday person felt identified with the lyrics and performance bringing in Rudy’s sexuality into a ‘real’ space, ignoring -perhaps forgetting, just like I did during my serenata- the fact that it was indeed a performance. However, even for the audience member to confuse ‘performance’ and ‘real’ flirting demonstrates the fact that one cannot dissociate the performer’s sexuality and their mariachi persona because whether the

singer wants it or not, the audience will have a perception of the singer's sexuality, after all, es una fantasía que te traigan serenata, and when they do, you bask in all the glory. The creation of this queer space, this fantasy, this heterotopia<sup>20</sup> “asserts difference and embodiment... remapping cultural spaces, voicing alterity and advocating multiplicity” (Soja, pg. 5) because it allows for the queer receptor of the performance and the performer to exist in the performative bubble of the song. In queering the lyrics, a queer voice arises —where it was previously assumed heterosexual— cantando por la *diferencia*, al demostrar la multiplicidad de las sexualidades queer. I emphasize the queer affectivity of his performance since Rudy still struggles with his queer performances. Since he performed ‘straight’ for several years (as to not have his sexuality questioned) he is still getting used to being out of the closet. Which is rather interesting because he mentioned that when it comes to mariachi music he is “a traditionalist, mariachi is about the passion, about the music, conveying the emotions, mariachi is about being able to interpret and capture what the lyrics say” and feels that ‘queering’ the songs can be disrespectful.

Yet, his performance of ‘Bésame mucho’ demonstrates that he performs queer well by *fooling* al otro in su performance. Not only that, but he also is weaving ‘traditional mariachi’ with queer sexualities, even when he is not always aware of doing so. Parte de his self-identification como ‘traditionalist’ is una crítica que él hace al Mariachi Arcoiris ya que de vez en cuando they perform English songs as well. Rudy

<sup>20</sup> Term borrowed from Foucault where heterotopias assert the value of difference by embodying an escape from oppression.

disagrees because “why should I translate my culture for the white colonizers? I shouldn't have to sing in English just because some white person wanted a mariachi [Rudy pronounced mariachi in a ‘white accent’], if I am going to sing in another language, I rather do a Mexican indigenous language, like Lila Downs, because my roots are in México.” Rudy demuestra cómo en la música siguen vigentes los problemas postcoloniales manifestados en la lengua, while also demonstrating resistance by refusing to sing en inglés. Es interesante el hincapié que Rudy hace en la importancia del español, y la manera en qué la música de mariachi conecta con sus raíces<sup>21</sup>. No obstante, la mayoría de sus respuestas en la entrevista fueron en inglés, demonstrating this clash between theory and praxis. ¿Qué significa que Rudy se identifique con sus raíces mexicanas pero se exprese de forma predominante en inglés? La tensión entre las lenguas demuestra una identidad, por lo menos en Rudy, basada en música y la imagen del mariachi, que juega con la Mexicanidad as expressed in Spanish and hence not always accessible to him. Yet as a Latinx in Los Angeles, he also redefines what this Mexicanidad means, even as he tries to adhere to tradition.

Thus, Rudy’s politics work with and through difference by building ‘solidarity and identification which make common struggle and resistance possible but without suppressing the real heterogeneity of interests and identities’ (Hall, pg. 44) demonstrating a way to participate in ‘gay culture’ despite his disidentification with ‘gay culture’ while maintaining his Mexican roots alive through su involucramiento in mariachi music and

<sup>21</sup> El entendimiento de Rudy sobre lo ‘indígena’ como algo más ‘mexicano’ complica la problemática omnipresente sobre ciudadanía y reconocimiento de las comunidades origen cuando se trata de representar culturalmente ‘lo mexicano’, como si las lenguas origen fueran entes abiertos para nuestro convenenciero consumo. Lo cual conlleva a contradicciones y problemáticas a lo que él supone/entiende como sus raíces.

performance. With Mariachi Arcoiris, slowly but surely Rudy has been *desenvolviéndose* y ha empezado to engage in ‘tasteful faggotry’, or a more ‘authentic’ representation of queerness and not a caricaturesque performance like in other straight and ‘traditional’ mariachis. Rudy has become self-confident in his own queerness thanks to Mariachi Arcoiris fostering of community. Arcoiris has helped him flourish by shedding a repressed past self en favor de existir by seizing space as a fabulous queer self, despite the contradictions that sometimes arise within his queer performances and his self-perception of ‘traditional’ interpretation of the music.

However, challenges come a many for the different members of the mariachi ensemble, particularly for Natalia Melendez<sup>22</sup> (singer and violinist) since she is a transgender woman. Natalia empezó a tocar el violín and “sing at like 10 years old, what I learned quickly at a young age is that there is a certain way to sing mariachi when you are a man, and I tried to emulate that, and would try to do that I would sing aggressive, hard and I would be pushing myself to sound like that, because I knew that’s how to be a man at an early age,” inciting a first instance of gender performativity in both her personal life and in the mariachi. On the one hand, playing and singing en el mariachi, as a job, required her to perform her then-male-presenting part, because it was a job she signed up for. Wanting to sing and play the violin was so important for her that she performed heterosexuality when singing because “even though I didn’t feel comfortable with it I wanted to sing, and I wanted to play and that’s what I had to do”. However, not only was Natalia struggling with what she thought was her gay sexuality but was also

<sup>22</sup> The following quotes come from a phone interview I administered to Melendez on December 4, 2017

struggling at that young age, not knowing she was a transwoman. While performing, she learned early on to “close that off and act a certain way” and perform her singing, especially when she had to sing to women. “A lot of the time I would sing to women, but it was generic because there was no truth, it was generic, I was being fake. I tried singing to women, I had to cater to them, singing songs to them, I did what I needed to do, it was a job so I had to do it but there was no authenticity” as her voice showed repugnance at remembering pretending to be a straight male. These negative feelings further emphasize the struggles of performing, catering and singing como heterosexual, all in part to the heteronormative society in which she was raised. Through her interview, there is a sense of how fine the line between subject and performer and how the Arcoiris mariachistas identities do not always align with the heteronormative paradigm of mariachi performance. Natalia’s example further cements the idea that one cannot detach the queer self from the musician self, since both evolved together, needing one another to define the selves. These two identities, queer and mariachi always play off each other. This idea of ‘authenticity’, or rather lack of, echoes in other interviews when the gay men singing to women felt ‘fake’ in their performance y preferían ‘sing from a distance’, como dijo Allen. The lyrical expression of the songs typically filled with deep and strong emotions of love for a woman proved problematic for those who were not attracted to women. One thing that is highly evident for the members of the Mariachi Arcoiris, is that no matter what form it takes, whether all men, all female or mix mariachi: pasión, corazón y alma are definitely parte del show. El mariachi is never just about hitting all the right notes, pero la pasión con la que se cantan y sienten las canciones, la interpretación de la música

es lo más importante. Interpretación que es finalmente auténtica para los miembros del Mariachi Arcoiris, debido a la apropiación queer de la letra de las canciones.

### **Regalando la caricia: appropriation and negotiation**

Considering mariachi is their job, the venues where they play vary. Due to their “out” status as a queer mariachi, they’ve had an advantage for being asked to play at queer events (same sex marriages, West Hollywood in queer clubs like Tempo, Pride Events, etc.). However, they must also engage in private events (birthday parties, for example) where they must negotiate their ‘out’ status. Es decir, hay un dónde y un cuándo se puede ser un mariachi queer. This focus on performing mariachi music and queered lyrics raises several questions: How is gender being performed or challenged when intersected with sexual identity? In what forms are the performances challenging queer politics? How is the music and space being appropriated or negotiated?

The negotiation of their queerness demonstrate how sexuality is always monitored, needing to be aware de los espacios donde se puede o no ser queer, a la vez, saber negociar su(s) sexualid(es). However, this negotiation and outspokenness demonstrates more than just the political power they re-present as a queer musical community since they are constantly transforming the cultural values with every caress en las serenatas, invoking queer sensitivities in the spectators, que a veces forza a la audiencia a enfrentarse a sus propios prejuicios. Cambios que idealmente mejoraran las actitudes negativas asociadas hacia la multiplicidad de subjetividades cuir por parte de la normatividad encontrada en todas partes.

Nevertheless, and at a risk, they sometimes engage with the heterosexual crowd, making them uncomfortable, by queering the songs and having the male cantantes sing to other men for the spectacle of queer performativity. Natalia (recordar la introducción de Natalia como “la primer mujer transgénero en la historia del mariachi”) mencionó<sup>23</sup> how “Sometimes I get worried because when guys sing at guys sometimes they snap at you, because I get physical, I touch them, but you know I am entertaining, I’m there to give you my sweat, my tears, my show. I wanna leave them wanting to hire us again next time, that’s what I do every time”. Pero siempre está ese miedo presente de no saber cómo reaccionará la persona/crowd when queerness envelopes the spectator in the performance. En varias ocasiones que los vi perform, the singers suelen cantar while walking around the available space (whether restaurant or club) buscando a quién dirigir la serenata. Once they find the person to sing to, el contacto físico varía entre ser a caress on the cheek (ver imagen 2.2) , when singing a love song, o llamarle la atención by tocando el hombro de la persona with which they are breaking up (all depending on la letra de la canción o lo que amerite el show).



*Image 2.2. Natalia caresses and sings to a male audience member at Más Malo Restaurant. 2017.*

<sup>23</sup> The following account and quotations are based on a phone interview I conducted with Natalia Melendez on November 5, 2017.

Pero como bien menciona, está ese riesgo omnipresente: el no saber cómo va a reaccionar la persona que recibe el halago de la serenata. Para Natalia, la interacción es siempre con hombres: "I sing to men, I love to interact with the crowd, I am myself, so everything that I do when I perform is coming from my heart, is coming from what I am feeling at that moment." Sin embargo, un problema con el cual Natalia se enfrentó, antes de estar en el Mariachi Arcoiris, fue el proceso de transición debido a que she transitioned in public — she never stopped performing in mariachis as she transitioned.

In the groundbreaking *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions the ideas of ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ to deconstruct their meaning and demonstrate the production of both categories, to display how sex does not lead to gender, and vice versa. Butler notes that for Simone de Beauvoir (“one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one<sup>24</sup>”), gender is a construction, hence, one is always under the cultural pressure to become one. From this *becoming*, Butler partakes, in principle, that the subject who appropriates said gender could also appropriate other genders since the “one” who becomes a woman does not have to be cis-female, early examples of this gender construction are demonstrated on drag queens that could pass as cisgender females. For Butler, drag forces a recontextualization of gender because drag performers demonstrate precisely the construction of gender by recreating, displacing and performing the meaning of the ‘original’ executed gender.

In contrast, to demonstrate some of the limits of the Butlerian theory, Natalia was not under the pressure “to become one” rather, she disidentified with her at-birth-

24 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. E. M. Parshley, (New York: Vintage, 1973), pg. 301.

sex/gender to BE herself, not become<sup>25</sup>. Whereas Butler takes gender as performative, like she mentions one 'can become', she leaves out transgender identity where one is not necessarily becoming another gender, but rather is being their true self. For Natalia, transitioning publicly was ultimately a difficult but personal political choice because she wanted to portray "possibility and I am trying to be that vessel that I never had growing up" demonstrating the importance of variance of visibility for queer subjects, there is power in the capability of being able to identify with someone who has also struggled due to their queer nature, seeing someone queer accept themselves can have a powerful impact for someone who is struggling with their queerness, it can have a positive impact in terms of acceptance of the individual and the queer communities.

Although the transition was a struggle that did not come easy considering she had learned to sing and 'be a man' in mariachi only to later forget everything she was 'supposed to be' in order to be the woman she always was and is. Part of the transitioning struggle manifested vocally. Since her voice was trained to "sing like a man, with harsh and strong vocals" she had to learn to forget the male voice since women "tend to sing softer". One problem Natalia experienced was through her voice since "a transwoman's voice doesn't change with hormones". Unfortunately, for Natalia queer performances can be stressful since, as a mariachi group, they must be very aware of the reception of their queerness in heteronormative spaces, spaces they have to engage in because of their

<sup>25</sup> Although this chapter does not engage with trans-problematics, the issue of essentialism does arise. What is the difference between becoming vs being? What would the 'self' be as a concept? Is transitioning a form of becoming or simply a step towards the gender expression/identity?

work, yet this demonstrates how space is indeed political, and as such, there is possibility for change.

Natalia mentioned how normative spaces worry her “because I’ve been a victim of physical violence, I have to read people because of who I am, of who I portray to be, of what this mariachi portrays to be” or simply because the audience does not know what the mariachi stands for. Despite ese temor, of not knowing how people will react to a queer mariachi, Natalia willingly tries to conquer her fears. She actively thinks of the political and social implications her outspokenness, visibility and courage evoke for trans people and, ultimately, her social engagement is with queer (of color) futurity in order to produce their “own life, their own consciousness, their own world” (Lefebvre, pg. 36). Fortunately, there are times when Mariachi Arcoiris can queer spaces with an open-minded and friendly crowd that wants to have a good time.

For example, Natalia mentions that when she is embodying the lyrics and wants to entertain, “I can be exaggerated, I can be dramatic” when it comes to giving a show. While singing to a guy she sat on his lap and sang to him but accidentally “spilled beer on a guy... I didn’t mean to do that, it was so embarrassing, but I put a show and the crowd loved it.” For her, the beer theatrics went well with the lyrics because she was ‘breaking up with him’ lyrically. She recounts that “they went crazy and they were giving me high fives,” demonstrating how sometimes a normative crowd allows Mariachi Arcoiris to be themselves. This illustrates how not every performative space is restricted the same way. While some spaces allow for less ‘queerness’ to shine in the performative spotlight, other spaces (regardless of the sexual and gender constrictions imposed)

demonstrate a more tolerant and welcoming attitude towards queer sexualities, and ultimately, queer subjects. This is important to note because there is a perception to how educational and raising awareness takes place within homo/hetero normative constricted space which demonstrates that these restrictions are not totally fixed. When Mariachi Arcoiris puts on a successful performance (which in my reading, they always do since they vocally present themselves as a queer mariachi, thus, actively voicing their queerness affecting the space/audience), they can expand and make these constrictions (what is allowed, permitted, etc.) less rigid.

In the seminal *The Production of Space* (1991), Henri Lefebvre argues that space is a complex but a social construct, based on different values. Values are social productions whose meaning ultimately affect the spatial practices and, of course, perceptions, of any given space (think for example, gender restrictions in bathrooms). As such, he argues that space not only produces but also “serves as a tool of thought and of action ... in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power” (pg. 26). In these spaces de dominación y poder son los cuales Mariachi Arcoiris reassembles, appropriates the power relations with each and every performance; ya que their queer appropriation of the mariachi music and their performance intercalan e irrumpen el control de los espacios en los que performean. Debido a que la heteronormatividad suele ser el poder dominante en los espacios de sus performances, with their successful performance, la heteronormatividad es derrumbada, aunque sea momentáneamente, para que las potencias queer reinen el espacio, creando una sensación de comunidad e inclusión en un espacio típicamente normado.

Por lo tanto, es justo ese derrumbe (when successfully performed) that allows for queer sensibilities to arise y de tal manera lxs interpretes tienen la habilidad de poder cantarle al género de su preferencia. Para Natalia, por ejemplo, es lo mejor ya que por fin: “I am a woman and I can sing to men finally, singing to men is a natural thing to me, there’s natural feelings and emotions that come from that and its natural and I am finally able to do that now, I can be authentic. There’s feeling and emotions coming to that naturally, it feels right.” Natalia’s reflections demuestran cómo el espectro queer de su sexualidad, al igual que los otros miembros, nunca dejó de existir en estos espacios controlados mientras estaban en mariachis ‘tradicionales’, sino que se sintieron forzados a abandonar, u ocultar, parte de su ser para seguir sus sueños y pasiones musicales. Always feeling divided. Con el Mariachi Arcoiris the interviewees demonstrated a sense of ‘true self’, el sentimiento de poder ser both queer y mariachi, aunque a veces tengan que police their own queerness due to the regulation of sex and gender in the performative space.

Estas críticas highlight identity politics, especialmente críticas hacia el policing de sexo y género, problemáticas que aún plagan the queer communities. Algunos de estos problemas se manifiestan en forma de queerphobia from heteronormative individuals, y en algunos casos, estas fobias están arraigadas dentro de la misma comunidad queer. Yet, precisely this willingness to face queerphobia y la valentía de aceptarse diferente para luchar en contra de prejuicios es lo que hace política, en el sentido Ranceriano (como expliqué anteriormente), en cada performance del Mariachi Arcoiris por el simple hecho de que causa una reacción, ya sea positiva o negativa, en la audiencia. Es decir, las

performances de Mariachi Arcoiris create ‘noise’ and ‘politics’ because “those who have no right to be counted as speaking beings makes themselves of some account, setting up a community by placing in common a wrong that is nothing more than this very confrontation,” (Ranciere, pg. 27). Cada reacción del público demuestra el potencial que el Mariachi Arcoiris tiene al poder abrir brechas nuevas, creando cambios en las comunidades queer que están presente en las performances pero a la vez creando cambios en los espacios en los cuales se presentan. The fact that the Mariachi Arcoiris members are out and proud and still facing collective (‘very lucky’ to be able to face it as a community as opposed to individually) discrimination or derogatory comments based on their sexualities, demonstrate the hurdles they’ve had to overcome to achieve a place of love for their queer selves, a place que muchas personas nunca llegan a tener desafortunadamente. Solo es cuestión de recordar las estadísticas que mencioné en el capítulo de la introducción sobre los suicidios o los asesinatos de personas queer que cada año aumentan (o por lo menos son más visibilizados por medio de redes sociales) como evidencia de la violencia y el infortunio en el que viven muchas personas. Violencia con la cual las comunidades queer aún están batallando (basta con pensar en las muertes de Pulse Nightclub, Miami, en junio del 2016).

One of the greatest achievements of Mariachi Arcoiris is precisely their willingness to expose themselves to critiques for being queer with the goal of having their visibility help others. Sometimes simply seeing them, their visibility as a queer ensemble can unleash empowering thoughts and feelings as a queer audience member because one could not have imagined that queerness and mariachi could be one. What often felt like a

dividing line, that of mariachi identification vs. queer identification, is finally reunited, expressed, and enjoyed through Mariachi Arcoiris.

As soon as the Mariachi Arcoiris introduces itself as “The first LGBT mariachi”, an automatic bond of love and respectability is created with the queer audience members because there is re-presentation of sexualities, affectivities and eróticas queer. The identification with Mariachi Arcoiris comes from a double community: Mariachi Arcoiris unites queer sexualities con cultura Mexicana. Not an easy accomplishment given the machista culture from which Mariachi is born. Although pain for the loss of a love interest can be a universal feeling, mariachi lyrics always have an implied heterosexual female love interest. Yet, with Mariachi Arcoiris’ outness, when a queer singer appropriates the lyrics, the performance takes an added dimension for queer identification and produces previously unknown knowledges on the queer audience. A remembrance of self-love, of resilience, OF EXISTENCE.

Often, heteronormative society is not aware of these types of queer conflicts, however, the queer audience recognizes the deeper and emotional affectivity of the appropriation, forging a strong(er) community ties, even if it is just for the duration of one performance. Pero ese momento, por más efímero que sea, crea un espacio; una impresión de amor personal, de que todo va a estar bien; que las comunidades queer vivirán como siempre lo han hecho. Justo en el momento de la apropiación de las canciones, ese queering effect, crea un espacio, una memoria, una impresión que hace olvidar las presiones normativas (ya sean hetero u homo), una utopía momentánea reinstating queer hope, love, vitality and happiness by reminding us, as queers of color,

that we exist, that we matter, that we are acknowledged, un recordatorio de que hemos forjado nuestras propias vidas, nuestro mundo y ultimadamente our own consciousness a pesar of all the faced challenges que emergen por no ser heterosexual. If nothing else, the fact that there was a connection y el recordatorio de ese sentimiento de positividad y amor propio que pueden causar las interpretaciones is monumental to achieve in a society that more often than not demeans queerness. El simple hecho de demostrar queer love en las canciones, o el sufrimiento mutuo por desamor romántico, crea a sense of community and belonging, a community that accepts the person just as they are leaving homo and heteronormativity behind, even if it is just momentary. The queer bond shares investment in queer futurity and acknowledgement of difference demonstrating life and resistance in the depiction of queer life/suffering as inhabiting different norms. An e/a/ffectivity previously unnoticed to some of the queer audience. The love/pain of the lyrics finally validates the queer affectivity and experience in both the performance and reception of the song. Whereas Muñoz states that “queerness is not yet here...but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality” (*Cruising Utopia*, pg, 1) I would like to push and say that queerness is indeed here, it has become more visible, vocal and tangible. Each performance of Mariachi Arcoiris seizes to be a ‘warm illumination’ and transforms into a fully self-aware welcoming embrace of potentiality, ya que el potencial también involucra al espectador and the affective performance.

### **‘Y me solté el cabello’ ... stages and performances de Mariachi Arcoiris**

El Mariachi Arcoiris participa en lo que José Esteban Muñoz calls “disidentificatory performances<sup>26</sup>”. In *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and Politics of Performance*, Muñoz notes how often queer people of color negotiate their identities in “a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not confirm to the phantasms of normative citizenship” (pg, 4) debido a que los actos de transgresión cuestionan las ‘verdades’ de la cultura hegemónica. En el caso de Arcoiris it is a doble transgression. En el ámbito heteronormativo by queering mariachi music through performance and mixed gender/sexualities; en el mundo homonormativo al presentar sexualidades queers con críticas sociales políticas que difieren de los movimientos homogénicos políticos del momento, los cuales hacen énfasis en los derechos del matrimonio gay o la agenda política de homosexuales en áreas militares como ya había mencionado.

Although Mariachi Arcoiris always presents itself as “El primer mariachi LGBT...” demostrando their queerness vocally, visualmente —hablando de stage/visual performance estrictamente— están limitados por el espacio en el cual el acto toma lugar. Por ejemplo, al estar en un espacio público y abierto hay más posibilidad de crear

<sup>26</sup> For Muñoz ‘disidentification’ is a third mode of engaging dominant ideology. A good subject can identify (assimilate), counter-identify (bad subject) or disidentify (working on and against) majoritarian ideology. “Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. 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 identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.” (*Disidentifications*, p. 31)

visualmente una atmósfera inclusiva, aunque a veces restrictiva. El pasado Noviembre del 2017, la ciudad de Long Beach invitó al Mariachi Arcoiris<sup>27</sup> a formar parte de la celebración de El Día de Muertos. Having a broader stage (ver imagen 2.3, below), on a main street, allows for the queer narrative to play out differently. Having a colorful “Arcoiris” as their main imagery on the screen is a visual reminder of who they are and the inclusivity the mariachi stands for.



*Image 2.3. Mariachi Arcoiris performing for El día de los Muertos in downtown Long Beach, 2017*

However, some of the Mariachi’s queer nuances can be lost. For example, audience members who arrive late and did not hear the ‘first LGBT mariachi’ introduction, may not realize it is a queer mariachi since the screen (when available) can be overshadowed by their performance as mariachi, missing that added layer of complexity to their show. Also, the distance between the spectator and stage may not allow to see the rainbow belt buckle which is part of their outfit in every outing.

<sup>27</sup> Part of this day’s performance can be seen in YouTube:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1wPzg9H0G8&t=33s>

Additionally, language es un problema debido a que no todxs lxs asistentes del show entienden español and will more likely miss the queering of the lyrics. Además, others may not know the meaning of the rainbow colors. Considering the ‘family friendly’ and traditional nature of the performative space (it was a cultural event after all), the performance focused on the music itself. For this reason, some of the musically and performative queer elements can pass by unnoticed for the ‘average’ English-monolingual-person. For example, the restrictive metal gate surrounding the stage creates a barrier from the audience; the performers cannot engage with the crowd to further ‘queer’ the space, as they sometimes caress the cheek of the serenaded person. Instead, knowing the stage restrictions, el mariachi hace popurrís de canciones populares demonstrating the versatility of the group, showcasing the talented voices of the singers and las técnicas musicales que pueden conquistar con sus respectivos instrumentos. Debido a los elementos queer que se pierden al estar distanciados de la audiencia, el Mariachi Arcoiris aún puede participar en el queering de la música. Por ejemplo, el ‘travestismo’ musical de Leandro cantando Lucha Villa o Mayra performeando Juan Gabriel. However, these queer nuances and homages can be lost in a mixed crowd like that of Long Beach where Latinxs and non-Latinxs coexist in the audience. Some may recognize the popular songs but would not make the ‘gender bending’ connection. No obstante, ese ‘travestismo musical’ puede ser ignorado debido a que, como espectador, no siempre se sabe el género del cantante original de la canción.

Yet this type of bigger stage and public space allows for what José Quiroga describes as “a sign that the community needs to understand itself in order to grow, as it

comes into contact with other and different forms of social polity” (pg. 141) by engaging in different aspects of their intersected performances, performances that vary according to the audience present and the spaces in which they perform their act. Where Arcoiris might have ‘toned down’ su cuirness para ser partícipes en un evento cultural, conectando con las raíces y tradiciones mexicanas, el proceso demuestra los diferentes aspectos de sus identidades y la manera en que negocian el aspecto queer de sus presentaciones. Es decir, no solo puede haber conexiones por medio de sexualidades cuirs sino que también las hay por medio de una tradición, de una cultura because at the end of the day it is about “the music, the people, connecting, making memories” like Natalia mentions.

Sara Ahmed mentions how “Queer feelings are ‘affected’ by the repetition of the scripts that they fail to reproduce, and this ‘affect’ is also a sign of what queer can do, of how it can work by working on the (hetero)normative.” (pg. 155) Mariachi Arcoiris repeats the script (through mariachi music) while their performances create new meanings, recontextualizing the historical anchors of mariachi lyrics. The emotions generated on the spectator, ya sea por medio de la identificación con latinidad or queerness, have the affective power to channel gateways for social and material change. The fascinating aspect of the mariachi performances’ is the composition of sexual and racial intersections coming from both US culture and Mexican culture, two very different modes of reading Mariachi Arcoiris, but most importantly, two very different modes of self-expression. A constant tension between queer and Mexican(-American) identity. Two different cultures that are intersected by race, gender and sexual politics. Inevitably, every performance of Mariachi Arcoiris creates emotions/affects, in the atmosphere of

visual performance, while creating collective politics for social alliances as they “describe ethnic [and sexual] difference and resistance not in terms of simple being, but through the more nuanced route of feeling” (Muñoz c, pg. 2). Alliances that are exhibited in each performance by highlighting and validating their ‘difference’ while creating communities-of-difference, a sense of belonging. Allowing the queer audience to participate en la fantasía de la serenata, being in the center of the mariachi ‘script’, following Ahmed’s terminology, rather than in the periphery where queerness is usually found. Their performances remind queer audiences that they in fact belong and are welcomed to feel both queer and brown.

In contrast, cuando están en un espacio abiertamente queer, donde las restricciones del espacio cambian, la performatividad and the nuances incrementan, allowing for queer sensibilities to flourish unabashedly. Not only is there a sense of relaxation for the queer performers by being in a queer place but also the audience engages in a more intimate level. One such place Mariachi Arcoiris performs every Sunday is Club Tempo, a queer space with a Latin cowboy theme where tejanas, cintos y botas are very common among the club goers. For Mariachi Arcoiris, Club Tempo creates opportunity for an always more intimate performance. Carlos mentioned when it comes to queer spaces “gay people in the crowd get emotional having a same-sex person in a mariachi sing to them because it never happens... and I sing more passionately to men because the lyrics are true,” once again demonstrating how, at least for these queer performers, mariachi is very much part of their queer identity. Never able to fully separate their identities, here they demonstrate how multiple identities complement each

other. These queer gestures and affective performances demonstrate “how we assign meaning in ways that are always already infused with cultural modes of knowing” (Rodriguez, pg. 2) modes of knowledge that allow for the multiplicity of the subjects to flourish without the need to divide the queer and mariachi self. Multiple identities and intersections that manifest harmoniously.

The affective performances of Mariachi Arcoiris are partly done through reinvention of the genre by appropriating the lyrics. This form of reinvention and appropriation can be seen in two specific performances of Mariachi Arcoiris: Carlos’s rendition of “A mi manera/My way” y Mayra’s act of “Ella”. “Ella” is a song written and performed originally by José Alfredo Jiménez about rejection from the love interest. However, through Mayra’s performance, by maintaining the original gender<sup>28</sup> of the lyrics, allows for lesbian desires to surface, creating a much-needed representation of lesbianism and/or Bi-sibility. Sexualities that often are left behind politically speaking, especially with bi-erasure being prominent in queer politics. However, the location of the “Ella” performance importa mucho, ya que su rendition is only *queered* cuando está en un espacio abiertamente queer. Es decir, si la interpretación de Mayra ocurriera en un espacio como el del ejemplo de Long Beach, habría menos impacto ya que su performance podría ser leída como una interpretación de una canción que ella canta. Sin embargo, al estar en un espacio queer como en Más Malo en Downtown Los Ángeles (donde frecuentemente trabajan), todas las canciones pueden ser interpretadas con afectividades queer, lo cual da espacio para interpretaciones con y para el público

<sup>28</sup> A similar type of lesbian performance that Chavela Vargas does in her performances with her butch-presenting on-stage persona.

también. Las performances en espacios queer tienen esa doble interpretación. Por una parte, puede ser leída como la narrativa de un ‘show de mariachi’ and their repertoire en un espacio específico y local. Por otra parte, Mariachi Arcoiris y sus performances representan deseos y sensibilidades queer, creando Visibilidad y espacios/comunidades en cada performance para que las identidades queer florezcan, tanto dentro del grupo mismo como en los espectadores.

Cuando Mayra interpreta “Ella” manteniendo la letra original “Me cansé de rogarle / me cansé de decirle / que yo sin ella / de pena muero” en un espacio queer, resalta justo eso: el aspecto de la sexualidad, una sexualidad que siempre está presente, una sexualidad que resalta formas diferentes de ser y de sentir. La (re)unión de queer bodies, and the subsequent opening to others (ya sea entre el grupo o con la audiencia), es una forma de activismo al crear “hope of queer politics that is bringing us closer to others, from whom we have been barred, might also bring us to different ways of living with others.” (Ahmed, pg. 165) Ya que da espacio para solidaridad comunitaria. There is strength in numbers. Seeing, hearing, feeling other queer bodies empowers the queer self.

Por medio de espacios queer, como Más Malo o Tempo, cada canción, cada acto, demuestra un exceso de sexualidades alternas que fluyen tras el performance. Cada selección de canción conlleva consigo una historia queer que resalta al introducirse como un mariachi queer. Por ejemplo, una canción de Juan Gabriel<sup>29</sup> implica afectividades diferentes en un club como Tempo debido a que Juan Gabriel es un artista queer (y unx de los mejores compositores mexicanxs) en donde la letra de la canción escenifica una

<sup>29</sup> Who popularly resisted and refused to answer questions about his sexuality by Fernando del Rincón in 2002: “lo que se ve no se pregunta”.

sexualidad queer donde se crea what Allen describes as “a sense of double community with the gay community” that comes from playing mariachi in a queer space, allowing for latinx *and* queer identification, not having to choose one over the other. Ya que las canciones de Juan Gabriel son tan populares y cantadas en todo tipo de espacio, las sensibilidades queer pueden perderse en un espacio restringido por heterosexualidad. At the same time, when two mariachi men sing a love song, queer sensibilities (¡y fantasias!) arise in their performance (ver imagen 2.4).



*Image 2.4. Carlos and Leandro in a duet. 2017.*

Mientras que en un espacio ‘heterosexual’ se pierde cierto aspecto de la comunidad, o ese sentir de belonging al perder parte de la estética cuir en la interpretación. Espacios ‘heterosexuales’ que dividen la identificación entre la música del mariachi y las sexualidades queer, espacios que comúnmente niegan a las sexualidades no-heterosexuales y mucho más a las que no son normativas.

Otro ejemplo de las políticas con las cuales el Mariachi Arcoiris trabaja se manifiesta por medio de la conciencia social y el activismo en sus performances. Cuando Carlos se apropia de “A mi manera/ My way” (imagen 2.5, below), popularizada por Frank Sinatra, lo hace con una conciencia social que va más allá de una ‘interpretación de sensibilidades queer’ (como la interpretación de ‘Ella’), instead he reminds the audience of la historia y problemática que the queer community faces. Antes de empezar su

estupenda interpretación, introduce una canción que será “bilingüe por si no entienden. Muy famosa en inglés y quiero dedicar esta canción para toda las personas y las víctimas que han muerto de SIDA, y también para nuestra comunidad latina dentro de la comunidad LGBT en general”. Aunque la melodía empieza lentamente, la intensidad con la que canta y la pasión incrementan paulatinamente, denotando y recordando the struggles the queer communities and queer individuals have faced. As his performance reminds ‘la comunidad LGBT en general’ the life they have formed, the lyrics cannot ring any truer “ya ves yo he sido así / te lo diré sinceramente/ viví la inmensidad sin conocer jamás fronteras / jugué sin descansar / a mi manera”, evoking a reaction in the audience, reminding them of their own personal histories and struggles involuntarily, but most importantly the resilience with which all queer subjects have survived. The performance allows for self-reflexion of the queer audience, a reminder of the spirit of queers and a reminder of the personal struggles that have gotten the subject to their current queer manifestation. The preface to the song and the performance of ‘A mi manera/My way’ embraces the crowd with queer love, reminding us of the personal struggles every queer has undergone and conquered, the memories evoked, like the struggle of coming out, are issues relating to all queers forging solidarity, no matter the differences among them, pero todxs unidxs por medio de la sexualidad explícita - tanto identidad sexual como a la actividad sexual.



*Image 2.5. Carlos singing “A mi manera/My way”*

As the song progresses and reaches the last chorus verse, so does Carlos’ vocal range, holding long, strong and passionate vibratos. Right before the last powerful verse, Carlos fully extends his arm (imagen 2.5, above), opening his chest, as if saying ‘this is who I am’ with his body, belting out “but through it all / when there was doubt/ I ate it up and spit it out / I faced it all and I stood tall / and did it my way”, by this part of the act, emotions are running high (chills all over my body) from having this much queer Visibility and sense of community. Many of the songs have reminded the audience, specially the queer spectators, of heartbreak, of love... of our humanness. Carlos’ rendition of ‘A mi manera/My way’ empowers the manifestation of queerness in the audience al recordar la resistencia con la que hemos sobrevivido, pero más importante, la necesidad de continuar trabajando on and for the queer communities’ futurity. If ‘A mi manera/My way’ is one path towards the queer communities’ futurity, then there are most

certainly other ways, other roads, other struggles that must be understood to create solidarity and “allow individuals to claim an affirmative identity, [it] can also be the basis by which ethnic groups catalyze collective action” (Román, pg. 104) en crear e incluir comunidades para el apoyo mútuo y el futuro cuir. If Carlos’ performance allows for an identification with a ‘collective community’, then part of our job as queer individuals is to help others achieve that same sense of belonging, of being wanted, of being accepted, to unite despite our differences and use precisely those differences for the empowerment and futurity of the different communities we belong.

## **Conclusion**

Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles, with their unapologetically raw queer sexualities and performances, bring Visibility to queerness. The affective responses to their performance create political engagement by creating a space and atmosphere for queer life to emerge front and center with the added bonus of a small —aunque sea efímera— comunidad queer que aloja y fomenta pride in their queerness. Most notably, unapologetically raw queer sexualities demonstrate hope, vitality, life, *existence* of the idea that one can be queer and proud, reminding that life exists outside the confinements of the closet or normativity. One important achievement of the Arcoiris performances is the creation of community and empowerment of queer lives, reminding us of the painful past, only to grow stronger by not forgetting the resilience of queer lives, siempre triunfando despite the struggles of queer life in a straight world. Todo esto por medio de la apropiación de espacios típicamente normativos que al ser queered da oportunidades para crear cambios políticos. Their constant aim for queer futurity —whether that

surfaces as queer sensibilities in songs or social consciousness— proves to be politically and socially engaging for the betterment and empowerment of the queer communities, all while maintaining the cultural memory alive through the narratives of the songs they perform and the narratives that preface their performance.

*Guardo tantos secretos que si no cuento al menos uno se me van a olvidar los demás -Delia (Casa de las flores)*

### **Más turbado: Mexican Sex(ualities) in *La casa de las flores***

The Netflix Original series *La casa de las flores* (2018), directed by Manolo Caro, follows the exploits of a wealthy family; a family with many, many secrets that quickly unravel the drama behind the titular flower shop. Among those secrets is a drag cabaret aptly named “La casa de las flores” (often referenced as *la casa chica*). The series informs the viewer that this show will engage in critiquing upper-class morality, the classic family structure (intertextually through Veronica Castro’s telenovelas), performance of upholding a status quo, suicide, lies, adultery, and sexuality. The contrast between these two houses allows to draw attention to the socio-economic and racial divides still present in modern-day Mexico and most importantly, calls attention to the tropes of family, gender and sexuality. This dark comedy, ever so self-aware of its connection to Mexican melodrama and telenovelas, undermines, recontextualizes and resignifies the very same structures it references. The transgressive *La casa de las flores* inserts queer elements into the structure of melodrama as a critique to the ‘traditional family’ and heteronormative society at large. With the family in shambles, what queer alternatives are offered to substitute or expand the formidable tradition of family in melodramas?

As I will demonstrate, thematically, the obvious queer representations in the show facilitate a dialogue with the political tensions in the current sexual climate. Following Jack Halberstam exploration of queer failure, my interest relies in the connotations of *la*

*casa chica* as a space for alternative knowledge and queer community that contrasts the conservative family model offered in melodramas. To meet this particular objective, I will analyze the metastructure, discourse<sup>1</sup>, tropes and clichés in classic Mexican telenovelas, family melodramas and the Nueva Novela which are clear inspirations in *La casa de las flores*. The ultimate goal is to demonstrate how capable or successful the Netflix original is in disrupting or remodeling the formal codes and tropes found in family melodramas, such as patterns of domination -family, gender and sexuality- that force Paulina and Julián, the main characters of interest for this chapter, to become their own agents of change while paying attention to the ways in which the show appropriates formal filmic codes to displace heterosexuality with queer intimacy. How will queerness surface in the appropriation of traditions found in melodramatic tropes and formal codes of film and telenovela?

### **Notes on the structure of Classic Mexican Telenovela and the Nueva Novela**

According to Guillermo Orozco Gómez, the Mexican Telenovela had its origins in the US-based soap operas (beginning in the 1950s) which introduced the format of a series-style. That considered, the two main differences between a soap opera and a *telenovela mexicana* are their narrative structure and duration. Soap operas, like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* in the 70s and 80s respectively, can last decades and have an open ending. On the other hand, Mexican telenovelas last “entre 90 y 120 capítulos y tiene una narrativa y final menos abierto” (Orozco, pg. 20). In other words, Mexican telenovelas,

<sup>1</sup> It is important to note that ‘discourse’ is utilized in its broader perspective, which not only includes the mere analysis of language, but to also emphasize the structure in which the visual discourse intersects with the oral and written discourses -which are naturally found in audiovisual projects.

by comparison to the US counterpart, have a repetitive metastructure<sup>2</sup> that functions in such a way that the viewer can miss an episode and still be familiar with the storylines. One key difference to note is that US soap operas are broadcasted during Day Time (normally between 9am and 5 pm), thus, themes are closely monitored/censored and/or limited since they follow a ‘for all the family’ approach. In México, day-time broadcasts display telenovelas for/with children with “family-oriented” themes like music and friendship in *Amigos x Siempre* (2000). The more popular telenovelas broadcast during Prime Time (7 pm-11 pm) and allow ‘adult’ themes to emerge on screen. Themes that allow greater plot twists like “deception, incest and adultery”, etc. (Suleiman González, pg. 86) flaunting “narrativas más melodramáticas, y finales casi siempre reivindicativos del sufrimiento de los protagonistas a lo largo de los capítulos” (Orozco Gómez, pg. 20).

Another structural difference and aspect of *la telenovela mexicana* is the episodic composition that has its origins in the “folletín europeo del siglo XIX, que en diferentes ‘entregas’ completaba una narración a sus ávidos lectores” (Orozco, pg. 20) in which the telenovela episode is formally and strategically truncated to add a suspenseful effect. Ultimately, a playful strategy with the viewer as means to entice them to return and continue the novela the following day<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> “permiten afirmar que en la producción televisiva hispanoamericana, si no se puede anticipar exactamente cómo terminará una telenovela, ¡por lo menos se puede saber de antemano cómo no podría terminar! Y la ruptura de esta tradición o pacto entre ficción televisiva y audiencias hace que los televidentes se sientan traicionados por el género televisivo, que justamente conlleva arreglos y acuerdos que no pueden violarse.” (Rebecca Padilla qtd in Orozco Gómez, 2004)

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, the *radionovela* also followed the episodic cliffhanger structure. A strategy *telenovelas mexicanas* also recollect from “una tradición oral, más que visual o de otras fuentes... como en la radio” (Orozco, pg. 21).

Traditionally, telenovelas have a storyline geared towards housewives where the female protagonist<sup>4</sup> has a Cinderella-type storyline. Often, the poor female protagonist falls in love with a rich man that loves her back, but because of their social class difference, they cannot marry (*Marimar* starring Thalia, i.e.), a storyline that also echoes in music like the uber popular Selena Quintanilla rendition of “Amor Prohibido”<sup>5</sup>. A variation to these familiar plotlines includes an interracial divide as cause of their pain<sup>6</sup>. There is no denying that telenovelas have had an unprecedented economic power but also, considering the potential of audiovisual media, one must be aware of television’s capacity and influences over the political perspectives shown to the viewer, a viewer that may decode or recode the producer’s intended encrypted message. A message that may take multiple meanings in a transnational context, for example.

The influences television and telenovelas have previously exerted over its viewers recall the cultural theorist Stuart Hall. His approach to textual analysis emphasizes the role the viewer plays in negotiating the messages of audiovisual projects. That is to say, in Reception Theory, the audience is not passive (which implies social control). Instead, the viewer is an active agent in the production of meaning and interpretation of the visual texts. In Hall’s fundamental 1976 essay “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse” the author offers a theoretical approach to media in terms of production,

4 With classic telenovelas pre-2000s, “las identidades se debatían entre el blanco y el negro, entre el ser y el no ser, vírgenes o prostitutas, ‘madrastas’ o ‘amantes’, ‘cencientas’ y ‘simple Marias” (Orozco Gomez, pg. 14) always engaging with archetypes of fictions presented in telenovelas.

5 Part of the lyrics in the chorus reads “Amor prohibido murmuran por las calles, porque somos de distintas sociedades”.

6 For a closer analysis of the racialized Cinderella-type telenovelas refer to Layla P. Suleiman Gonzalez’s article “Mirada de Mujer: Negotiating Latina Identities and the Telenovela” (2002) where a feminist approach to gender presentation in Telenovelas is revealed.

dissemination and interpretation. Hall proposes an active audience when it comes to decoding<sup>7</sup> the messages of the audiovisual project. The active viewer/agent decodes accordingly to their social context and this decoding can lead to social change through collective actions<sup>8</sup>. One such example of collective action can be exemplified in the telenovela *Simplemente María* (1969). According to the entry of 'Telenovela' of the Encyclopedia Britannica, the popular Peruvian telenovela *Simplemente Maria* "centered on a main character who moved from a rural area to Lima, put herself through night school, became a seamstress, and eventually launched a successful fashion line" (n.p.) is credited to "increased rural-to-urban migration and night-school class attendance in Peru." (n.p.) which demonstrates -even if it is partial participation- that there are indeed active subjects. Viewers who *learn* from *telenovelas* since the work incorporates values and norms deemed worthy, important and readily available in society. That is to say,

<sup>7</sup> In simple terms, decoding implies 'translating' the audiovisual message into something that is understood. Decoding thus implies both verbal and non-verbal forms of communication. For ex. Non-verbal communication can be understood through body language, facial expressions, tears, etc. Due to the nature of communication, the message can be interpreted differently. Decoding has everything to do with understanding what someone already knows based on the information given in the verbal and non-verbal messages.

<sup>8</sup>The four different codes of Encoding/Decoding according to Hall are: 1) Dominant (hegemonic) mode: "When the viewer takes the connoted meaning full and straight and decodes the message in terms of the reference-code in which it has been coded, it operates inside the dominant code." 2) Professional code: it operates in tandem with the dominant code to reproduce dominant definitions since "It serves to reproduce the dominant definitions precisely by bracketing the hegemonic quality, and operating with professional codings which relate to such questions as visual quality, news and presentational values, televisual quality, 'professionalism' etc". 3) The Negotiated Code: "It acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations, while, at a more restricted, situational level, it makes its own ground-rules, it operates with 'exceptions' to the rules".4) Oppositional Code: "It is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and connotative inflection given to an event, but to determine to decode the message in a globally contrary way." "Before this message can have an 'effect' (however defined), or satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be perceived as a meaningful discourse and meaningfully de-coded" (Hall, pgs. 16-18).

telenovelas, albeit not particularly known for providing education nor information, have the power to educate and have the ability to instigate a collective unity.

One great example of the power and international popularity of Mexican telenovelas can be seen with the classic *Los ricos también lloran*<sup>9</sup> (1979). As previously stated, the plots of Mexican telenovelas broadcasted after the 1970s often were variants of the Cinderella story, in which the main character was a woman from a poor family who met and fell in love with a wealthy man. *Los ricos* follows this generic plot to present Mariana (Veronica Castro) as an orphan and maid to an upper-class family, where instinctively, she falls in love with the wealthy son. Later, this initial love leads to the procreation of a baby only to have the wealthy lover reject her since he doubts his paternity. In a melodramatic twist, this leads Mariana to insanity and she gives away her baby. With time, and for the rest of the *capítulos*, Mariana recollects her senses and fights back to reunite with her child, ultimately achieving her happy ending.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, essayist Ibsen Martínez in “Romancing the Globe” (2005) notes the rise of Latin American telenovela’s popularity in eastern countries over US soap operas is partly due to historical and cultural political struggles. According to the author, when communism fell, TV executives in the former Soviet Union encountered a crisis. Prior to the fall, “the television dial brought viewers nothing but state-approved programming...

<sup>9</sup> The main protagonist of this *telenovela* was Veronica Castro who also appears in *La casa de las flores*. More on this connection in a later section.

<sup>10</sup> *Los ricos también lloran* proved to be beyond popular in Mexico and this particular novela became an international hit post-Cold War World. As a matter of fact, it was so famous that in Russia<sup>10</sup> “Variety put viewership at a record 100 million. Pravda reported that in the Caucasus warring Georgian and Abkhazian soldiers arranged a tacit truce at the hours the show aired so they could watch it, mesmerized by the woman with billowy brown hair [Veronica Castro].” (Quinones, n.p.).

these former communist-controlled networks did not have the budgets to purchase US or European programming". Latin American executives capitalized on this opportunity by offering great deals on the exported telenovelas which coincidentally resonated thematically (rising from poverty, economic hardships, etc.) in these socialist countries. "When you're looking at countries that are rapidly industrializing, rapidly urbanizing, with all the attendant stresses and strains on the family and personal relationships, something produced in Brazil or Mexico may be a lot more relevant to Russians in the 90s than an American sitcom, which is frothy and all about L.A." (pg. 53-4). It is exactly at the juncture of desires and aspirations that telenovelas thrive; they create a sense of connection and identification in the viewer, allowing for the personal to also be political. For this particular chapter, it is of most importance to correlate the personal, as an active viewer/agent, with the political because gender and sexual politics are ultimately part of larger issues rooted in social constructions.

Telenovelas, in the process of exportation<sup>11</sup> (continental or transcontinental) showcase the values and morals of the dominant and hegemonic group. Morals and values shown in these high-production telenovelas are strictly controlled by major networks. In the case of *Los ricos también lloran*, the worldwide spectators learned about the men and women, the particularities and speech characteristics and certain traditions of México. Morals and values that coincidentally manifested in Veronica Castro's personal

<sup>11</sup> I would like to mention that telenovelas can also be problematic in terms of representation for they mostly employ light-skinned actors who are 'commercially' (re: eurocentric) beautiful. At times they can also reinforce racial and gender stereotypes, and far too often, the female protagonist is saved by the male counterpart.

history and as an actress in which *la chaparrita*, as she is often lovingly referred to, became a symbol of “Mexican womanhood as exemplified by the typical telenovela heroine: pretty, sweet, hard-working, rising from poverty.” (Quinones, n.p.). If telenovelas can implement change in the perspective of the viewers (gender roles, i.e), then it must certainly hold true that television is more than an escapist mechanism. Telenovelas have the potential to implement change at a social scale by playing with the sympathies and antipathies (the viewers *feel* human relations) and promote education like the example of *Simplemente María*. The viewer must navigate the tumultuous waters of global capitalism found in Telenovelas to extract the radical potentials that lead to social transformations and solidarity opportunities found therein.

The massive popularity of *telenovelas* in terms of consumerism and capitalism, allows mass media conglomerates, like Univision and Televisa, to benefit through a surge charge in ads during broadcast. This capitalistic mentality in turn, as Orozco Gómez points out, gives rise to the emergence of the more recent “nueva telenovela”. He defines this new novela as “La telenovela y los que la realizan hoy en día parecen estar simplemente preocupados por venderla” (Orozco, pg. 17) where the telenovela is strategized for marketing and thus “muestra imágenes atractivas, como las de sus actores, semidesnudos masculinos y femeninos, y muestra rasgos de moda, tanto en el vestido como en el lenguaje y los gestos, que al presentarse con caras y cuerpos atractivos se hacen *apetecibles* a los ojos de los televidentes, y por tanto consumibles” (ibid.). One such example, as the author references, is the mid-2000’s novela *Rebelde* where the quality of

acting is reduced to a secondary attribute and the *Nueva Novela* “empieza a ‘no ser vista’, sino simplemente consumida” (ibid.) due to the exacerbation of merchandising and capitalist mentality that preys on the purchase power of the viewers. As a consequence of the money-hungry multimedia conglomerates, the “Nueva Novela” does not find “criterios de estética, calidad técnica y dramática o de innovación” (ibid.) as important.

Anthropologist Nestor García Canclini also points to this change in quality and tendency in the *Nueva novela*. He agrees that businessmen now have more power to control the content of the telenovelas since they:

“adquieren un papel más decisivo que cualquier otro mediador estéticamente especializado (crítico, historiador del arte) y toman decisiones claves sobre lo que debe o no debe producirse y comunicarse; las posiciones de estos intermediarios privilegiados se adoptan dando el mayor peso al beneficio económico y subordinando los valores estéticos a lo que ellos interpretan como tendencias del mercado”

(García Canclini, pg. 61)

Orozco Gómez, in his study<sup>12</sup> of Ratings in PrimeTime *telenovelas*, mentions how in Televisa, “un capítulo de una hora de telenovela...asciende a 70,000 dólares” but the company quickly gains back the investment through ad sells in the commercial breaks. He mentions, that on average, a twenty-second ad on Prime Time runs for 348,700 pesos (close to twenty thousand dollars). Considering *telenovelas* have three commercial breaks with approximately twenty twenty-seconds publicity spots in each break, Televisa gains close to twenty million pesos in ads during the hour the episode is shown.

12 “Programación de mayor Rating, TV abierta, Prime Time, Semana del 14 al 20 de Noviembre, 2005. Datos de IBOPE-AGB Mexico.”

Revenue for the *Nueva telenovela* also comes in the form of propaganda and promotion of different products that carry the *telenovela*'s namesake like "camisetas, artículos de tocador, muñecos de peluche, fotografías, goma de mascar, etc." (pgs. 17-9). For example, the trademarked RBD "tooth tunes" toothbrush (See *Img. 3.1*) has the selling

point of "music in your mouth" promoting the single "Ser o parecer" of the RBD music group. RBD was both an in-novela pop group and a real-life touring band. The *Nueva telenovela* leaves the 'screen' and invades



*Image 3.1. RBD toothtunes*

both the private and public spheres omnipresently. Structurally, the telenovela has morphed into a hyper-mediated telenovela, promoting merchandise in multiple capitalistic venues at the expense of the quality of well-structured and performative dramatic storylines<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>13</sup> It is important to keep in mind, however, that telenovelas and melodrama generally, have not been traditionally considered of high artistic value. As it relies heavily on emotions, pathos and sensationalism, melodrama has been criticized as "low brow" and relegated to the "woman's genre", See for example "Tears and Desires" by Ana M. Lopez for a historical background. That only changed with a reevaluation, from the perspective of cultural studies and feminism beginning in the 1970s, of viewer engagement and what is worth studying critically, namely any kind of popular culture. Recent theorists, however, point out melodrama's intersectional discourse of gender, sexuality, race, nationalism and modernity. See for example, Christine Gledhill's *Home is Where the Heart is* (1987), Elena Lahr-Vivaz' *Mexican Melodrama: Film and Nation from the Golden Age to the New Wave* (2016) and Sergio de la Mora's *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexualities in Mexican Film* (2006).

## **The rise of Netflix and *La casa de las flores***

By the late 1990s, dial-up services were the only way to expensively connect to the internet at a snail-slow pace, thus, streaming a film, a music video or a TV show required patience and long, long waiting periods (and the privilege of access to a connection). In “The Fascinating History of Netflix” (2019), McFadden notes that Netflix first begun its services (US only) in 1997. It was a web-based DVD movie rental service where the user could order/rent the DVD they wanted, and the company would mail the film. The user would then return them back to Netflix through mail as well. In the mid-to-late 2000s, fast broadband internet availability and access made streaming feasible. By 2007, Netflix (a subscription service by this point in time and boasting over six million users) introduced streaming as an alternative to DVD-only rentals which allow its users to instantly watch television shows and movies on a smart device (Tablet, computer, cellphone, etc.). Ultimately, changing the ways people see films/TV (no need to watch at a movie theater, for example).

In 2011, Netflix launched internationally in Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>14</sup>. By 2013, Netflix started producing award-winning quality and original content<sup>15</sup> that further cemented Netflix as a multimedia powerhouse. Bela Bajaria, Netflix leader for

<sup>14</sup> The international growth strategy has been a “critical foundations of Netflix’s success. Since launching in Canada in 2010, it has grown its global footprint to 190 countries, and has an estimated 80 million subscribers outside the U.S.” mentions Mary Ann Halford in “International Insights: Netflix, the Global Monolith” (2019).

<sup>15</sup> According to McFadden “Netflix received 31 primetime Emmy nominations including outstanding drama series, comedy series and documentary or nonfiction special for “House of Cards”, “Orange is the new black”, and “The Square” respectively. House of Cards won three Primetime Emmy Awards. Netflix was the first internet TV network nominated for the Primetime Emmy”

original non-English international content, in an interview by Carrie Khan (NPR), discussed Netflix as a platform and environment for diversity “for these storytellers in these countries to be able to tell the story in the most authentic way;” the liberty Netflix, as a producer, provides for films/shows permitted more advanced forms to reach new audiences (mostly middle class, since it is still a premium service that require access to fast internet) and more original content when it came to queer themes/subjects since “they are risky themes...*La casa de las flores* as its been made couldn’t be broadcast on open television because we have risked and pushed on boundaries, and we haven’t made something appropriate for children” (Manolo Caro qtd. in Tillman, 2019).

At the same time, Netflix supports international productions since “over half of Netflix’s audience is now international, and international subscriptions are far outpacing domestic,” mentions reporter of the Los Angeles Times Laura Tillman “in the last quarter of 2018, the company added 1.5 million subscribers and 7.3 million international subscribers”. According to content chief Ted Sarandos, due to the success of Netflix-backed international media produced in Mexico (like the 2018 award-winning *Roma* or the 2018 *Narcos: México* series) the company has decided to produce fifty TV shows and films over two years which makes Mexico “in terms of sheer production volume, Netflix’s top international territory.” (Hecht, 2019). Strategically, Mexico became a priority because it is where “the company first started producing non-English original programming [*Club de Cuervos* in 2015] since it expanded internationally to

Latin America in 2011, and the country is the furthest along in the region with respect to production and viewership.” (ibid.). With a significant and international audience, how is *La casa de las flores* signaling cultural codes of/to the middle class, queer and transnational consumers?

The advent of video-on-demand services, aided by the technological options provided by access to fast internet, permitted the “possibility of watching movies on the emergent cable systems had allowed *the middle class* to avoid theaters” (pg. 2, my emphasis), as Ignacio Sánchez Prado notes in *Screening Neoliberalism* (2014). Although Sánchez Prado’s book engages solely with the historic declines, subsequent revivals and transformation of Mexican cinema, the neoliberalist media industry had room for private enterprises, like Netflix, to “compete with the State production of cultural commodities and the way in which [audiovisual productions] perform or resist the cultural values and implications of the neoliberal process” (ibid. pg. 7). *La casa de la flores* is certainly tied to certain ideologies stemming from both Mexican melodramatic traditions as well as with gender and sexual politics aimed at a global/international viewer.

In order to better contextualize *La casa de las flores* in both Manolo Caro’s oeuvre and the greater (inter)national queer mediascape, it is important to preface the idiosyncratic treatment of gender and queer themes in his films. Manolo Caro, director of *La casa de las flores*, previously wrote and directed the films *No sé si cortarme las venas o dejármelas largas* (2012), *Elvira, te daría mi vida pero la estoy usando* (2014) and *La vida inmoral de la pareja ideal* (2016) in which his muse Cecilia Suárez (Paulina in *La casa*) is also present. In these films, queer sexualities have a secondary role. Yet, the

women Suárez portrays are constantly involved (at times unaware) in lies and infidelities. The previously cited films, often relying on the Mexican melodramatic traditions, tell the stories of the dysfunctional and emotional conflicts of middle-class marriages, weighted down by an obscure past which translate to a lack of motivation in the present (of the film), suffering women and expressive forms of affect, for example. When it comes to sexuality, homosexuality in his films is always a secondary subject or one of the ‘secrets’ that provides narrative melodrama to the film (in *Elvira*, the protagonist finds out her husband is having an affair with a male lover, i.e.).

Yet, Manolo Caro’s *ouvrés* are tied to certain products and ideologies stemming from Mexican cinema that are both a critique to the socio-sexual cultural space they inhabit and a cultural response to the film and telenovela traditions of México. For example, in “Tears in Desire: Women and Melodrama in the ‘Old’ Mexican Cinema”, Ana M. Lopez notes a tendency, between the 1930s and 1960s, for family melodramas with a strong focus on “problems of love, *sexuality*, and parenting,” in which “the representation of women, female subjectivity, *desire*, *gendered* critical categories, and the role of women” (pg. 507, my emphasis), created specific dramas that “complicated straightforward ideological identification for men *and* women” (pg. 511), thus, projecting onto the screen the contradictions and desires of Mexican society. Complicated desires and at-times-homoerotic tendencies that Sergio de la Mora further explores in *Cinemachismo: Masculinities and Sexuality in Mexican Film* (2006). Whereas López’ analysis primarily explores the placement of women in Mexican melodramas, de la Mora engages in examining the “visual and narrative codes used to include, diffuse, and/or

contain homoerotic representation” (pg. 71). In his analysis of Mexican masculinity, particularly in Pedro Infante’s *compadrismo* films, de la Mora notes how the representation of “the bond between *cuates* both exceed and uphold compulsory heterosexuality... which introduce sexual ambiguity and register anxieties about heterosexual masculinity through male homosocial bonds.” (pg. 70). According to the author, this homoeroticism is contained through the opposite-sex coupling of the erotic triangle imposed by the female love interest that both facilitated and blocked “the physical and affective ties between the men” (ibid.). Nonetheless, the predominantly conservative narrative of the patriarchal family structure that telenovelas and family melodramas promoted contained messages that could be decoded oppositional to the original intent just as López did with female gender/sexuality and de la Mora with his reading on homoeroticism in Infante’s *compadrismo* films.

Furthermore, Manolo Caro’s films, historically, are both informed by a certain filmic tradition and response to the legacy of *Nuevo Cine Mexicano*. According to Sánchez Prado, the rebirth of the Mexican film industry (late 1980s-90s) needed to break from the “inherited languages of film nationalisms” and to “reflect the experiences of new social groups that were emerging along with the process of cultural remodernization brought about by the neoliberal economic and political model” (pg. 5), in other words, a new audience, a middle class, with an economic surplus to become moviegoers. The need to cater to a new audience also meant a change in content of the films presented for they needed to appeal to a “basis of a cultural language and a system of values” (ibid.) to sell tickets at a profit. The demographic changes in spectators, as well as technological

advancements, signified a transformation in both the production and consumption of cinema.

The Netflix Original *La casa de las flores*, clearly inspired by both Mexican family melodramas and telenovelas, diverts from over-the-air broadcasting into the digital world of *streaming* -sans commercial breaks. Thanks to the advent of fast-speed internet and technological advancements in communication services, Netflix became the go-to subscription service for a vast array of online libraries of both films and television, of which many are Netflix originals<sup>16</sup>. It is important to note that only certain demographics, often limited to urban territories, have access to high speed internet/Netflix, thus, the Netflix Originals privilege and target a specific audience<sup>17</sup>.

<sup>16</sup>According to Engadget, home for technology news and reviews since 2004, there are over 1000 Netflix Originals as of 2019. Some of the most popular shows include *House of Cards* (2013) and *Orange is the New Black* (2013). Both shows, among other originals, have received accolades in the form of not only public appreciation but also multiple Emmys, Golden Globes and appreciation from the Academy Award, Television Critics Association Awards, BAFTA, Critic's Choice Television Award, Screen Actors Guild Awards, etc.

<https://www.engadget.com/2019-11-12-disney-plus-vs-the-competition.html>

<sup>17</sup> When it comes to the Latin American audience, particularly a Mexican audience, the cinematic cultural taste was further developed in the 1990s and 2000s with the aesthetics of New Mexican Cinema or what many film critics call a "rebirth" of Mexican cinema with production of higher-quality films with themes that addressed gender roles, identity, tradition, and socio-political conflicts within Mexico. Films like *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (Dir. Alonso Arau, 1992), *Y tú mamá también* (Dir. Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *Amores Perros* (Dir. Alejandro Iñárritu, 2000) are some of the more popular films in this new wave of Mexican cinema. Films under the New Maricón Cinema label, a term Vinodh Venkatesh coins, include themes dealing with LGBTQ+ difference with an ethical and visually disaffected position that create affective connections with the viewers. Some films under NMC include *XXY* (Dir. Lucía Puenzo, 2008), *Contracorriente* (Dir. Javier Fuentes León, 2009) and *Antes que anochezca* (Dir. Julián Schnabel, 2001).

### **The aesthetics, references, and appropriations of clichés in *La casa de las flores***

With the financial backing and liberty provided by the production powerhouse, *La casa* returns with a strong association to the importance of aesthetics and quality in both filmic techniques and complex storylines. *La casa de las flores* is a Mexican dramedy, created by Manolo Caro, depicting the upper-class and dysfunctional Mexican De la Mora family, owners of the titular flower shop. At first glance from the opening episode, the show recalls, in both structure and melodrama, the uber popular *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012, ABC). Both pilot episodes begin with the suicide of a female character, ironically surviving as the narrator, that has two functions. At one instance, the suicide thematically demonstrates the social pressures of upholding the family unit and its alienating effects amidst this seemingly perfect social groups but also emphasizes and critiques the *performance of looking* perfect and happy to the society outside of the home, a structure readily available since “melodrama is structured around the ‘dual recognition’ of how things are and how they should be” (Williams, pg. 48).

In *Desperate Housewives*<sup>18</sup>, the opening scene, unravels the story of desperation of the women in the fictional suburb of Wisteria Lane. Alice (Brenda Strong), the narrator and Stepford wife-like, begins telling the viewer with eerie happiness “Everything seemed *normal* at first. I made breakfast for my family, I performed my chores,” as images of her daily activities intercut the description, she continues, “I completed my projects, I ran my errands. In truth, I spent my day like any other day, quietly polishing the *routine* of my

<sup>18</sup> According to several news outlets, like the Washington Post, the pilot episode garnered over 21 million viewers and quickly become the most watched show for several years, obtaining several entertainments awards as well. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A10007-2004Oct5.html>

life, until it gleamed with *perfection*” when suddenly she retrieves, from her closet, a revolver and pulls the trigger. The opening scene begins with a dark commentary on both the middle class and the frustrations of upholding heteronormative family values.

Gabrielle (Eva Longoria) reunited with the other main characters at Alice’s wake, asks her friends “What kind of problems could she have? She was healthy, had a great home, a nice family, her life was” -as Lynette (Felicity Huffman) interjects “our life<sup>19</sup>”.

*Desperate*, known for its racy display of sexuality, appeals to the audience by tackling and critiquing traditional social roles and showcasing, through exaggerated secrets and mysteries behind the supposedly perfect suburb, the preoccupations and farces of the middle class.

Following a similar melodramatic approach, *La casa de las flores*, with the opening scene, foreshadows the premise of the series. The viewer first encounters a Vincent Van Gogh quote amidst a black background "La **normalidad** es un camino pavimentado. Es cómodo para caminar, pero nunca crecerán flores en él" a normality that was part of the same triggers and problems for Alice in *Desperate Housewives*. After the fadeout of the quote, *La casa* opens *in media res* with a wide shot of the fictional and majestic flower shop, the

<sup>19</sup> In a scene prior to the wake, Alice introduces the protagonists as unsatisfied with their lives, a fact the housewives do not know about each other “we wouldn’t want them to think we aren’t happy” like Gabrielle scolds her husband after he commands her to lower her voice after a minor argument in the street. Gabrielle, ignored by her business-oriented husband, is sexually frustrated and begins an affair with her underage gardener. Lynette was a rising businesswoman who left her job to raise children, unsatisfied with motherhood she longs to return to work. Bree (Marcia Cross), “according to everyone around her, is the perfect (and classic) mother and wife” -except for her family who hate her control-freak and emotionless demeanor. Finally, Susan (Teri Hatcher) is a single mother resulting from her husband’s adultery with his secretary.

opulence is so that it fills the entirety of the screen, as Roberta, the family patriarch's lover, walks into the shop wearing a flowy mid length marigold dress on the day of the patriarch Ernesto's birthday festivities. Once inside this space, the voice-over narrates the history, legacy and prestige of the shop from the past fifty years. Simultaneously, the camera alternates between several close-ups of the beautifully designed bouquets to her manicured hands caressing other arrangements. The narrator continues cheekily informing that the de la Mora family is known as "el modelo a seguir, la familia ejemplar... o por lo menos lo que Virginia de la Mora<sup>20</sup>, la matriarca, nos ha hecho creer". The shot then is followed by a close up of Roberta's hand affixing a golden envelope, addressed to Virginia, onto a bouquet. The next shot positions the camera inside the shop, showcasing an array of flowers in this intimate space, while the voice-over shares "para eso estoy yo aquí. Es hora de decir la verdad" as the bottom of her flowy dress and high-heeled feet dangle from left to right juxtaposing the serene flower arrangements, out of focus and now in the background, before it cuts to the title sequence. The suicide is the culprit of the seepage of truth, just like in *Desperate Housewives*. After the title sequence, the viewer is informed that a temporal break has occurred, and the story is now situated three hours before the suicide. Roberta, in voice over, breaks the fourth wall and addresses the paying viewer and apologizes for not having introduced herself before. Clearly, a departure from classic telenovela structure. The classic telenovela tells a linear story, with archetypal (re: morally black or white) characters that

<sup>20</sup> By having Veronica Castro, known for classic telenovelas and their gender roles, as a modern family matriarch, the show adds complexity to the melodramatic critiques of both her best-known characters and the morally dubious character she plays here.

act out repeated and familiar tales of love, loss, tragedy and redemption (all stemming from hegemonic morals and values). Structurally, telenovelas generally are “una historia narrada por episodios en television, con una tension lineal creciente, que alcanza su climax en el momento en que se resuelve el conflicto principal. Acompañada de subtramas, la historia recurre al esquema del melodrama para articular la narración” (Lizaur, pg. 110), a climax that returns order with a happy ending: the marriage of the protagonists. While the telenovela (free access) assumes implicit viewership, since the story is always self-contained, the producing companies address the audience through advertisements. In contrast, *La casa* actively addresses the paying audience, involving the viewer in the storytelling, and inviting them to participate and witness the story of the De la Mora family. A story that intertextually begins before entering the private space of the home. With the camera, positioned outside the flower shop, in a long shot, panning to the opposite side, the De la Mora massive residence is revealed, a reference to their upper-class status, while multiple helpers busily transport general party decor. Once inside, the main characters of interest are introduced amidst a tasteful but ornamental and colorful interior.

Julián, dressed in formal attire, is first presented from behind in a medium close up, in his room, while holding and looking at his cell phone in front of a female. His first uttered words are “perdón, es que acaba de aterrizar mi hermana,” informing the female as they resume kissing. At first instance, Julián seems to be having a normal conversation with his girlfriend, however, as they

begin to kiss, the camera starts to zoom out to a three-quarter shot, revealing a bottomless Julián engaged mid coitus (See Image 3.2).

A comedic scene with an underlying critique to presumed (hetero)sexuality as devoid of all romanticism, and perhaps interest.



*IMAGE 3.2. First time the character of Julián enters the screen.*

After his opening line, and the zoom out, the three-quarter shot remains fixed showcasing his plump bare bottom while Julián lifts the girlfriend on his hips. It is important to note that sex is never portrayed, only ever insinuated, in telenovelas. Less common is the objectification of the male character<sup>21</sup> with clearly gratuitous views of his ample behind (featured in several scenes) since his light skin catches the eye against the dark background. Julián then turns her back towards the camera, positioned where the bed would be, and begins walking towards it. The sexually engaged bodies begin to fill

<sup>21</sup> In *Cinemachismo*, De la Mora notes how certain frames/scenes in Pedro Infante's films would objectify and display his nude upper torso but always in a nonsexual setting, whereas *La casa* is objectifying the male body during a sexual act.

most of the screen, in a reverse zoom in, before dropping into the bed and quickly ending the scene.

The very first impression of this particular character and sexuality depicts him as someone who is sexual yet somewhat uninterested in his girlfriend. In terms of the metastructure of the scene, it breaks with formal codes of representation of sexual activity in telenovelas; considering the strong intertextuality with the genre, one would have expected this particular scene to be truncated, both in content and shot technicality, before the exposure of explicit sexualized body parts, since, traditionally, sexual intimacy is only ever insinuated<sup>22</sup> in classic telenovelas. Formally, a close-up shot displaces any sexually charged scene with romantic and passionate intimacy, like in the image below. The close up shot, in its portrayal of intimacy, disavows any form of bodily objectification and demands attention to the passionate kiss. By comparison, Julián's opening scene, denies any romanticism and passion by presenting a lackluster private heterosexual discourse, a discourse that falls in line with his mother's ideals of compulsory heterosexuality. The lack of sexual inspiration and the absence of romantic formal codes for romantic intimacy (no close-up shot) foreshadows Julián's sexuality and an initial critique and failure, that will become more apparent, of upper-class heteronormative morale.

<sup>22</sup>For more in depth analysis of the way sexuality is typically represented in classic melodramas, refer to my chapter of Melodrama by Luis Zapata.



IMAGE 3.3. Still from the telenovela *El Privilegio de Amar* (1998)

Whereas Julián's introduction foreshadows the failure of heterosexuality, Paulina's introduction repeats the failure in a different fashion. In stark contrast, Paulina, the protagonist of the following scene, and undoubtedly the breakthrough character of the show aided by her slow speech pattern<sup>23</sup>, enters the foyer after giving further instructions to the maids (let us recall that the show begins in the middle of a birthday celebration). Dressed in a loose-fitting, marron-peach jumpsuit and flat shoes (harshly contrasting the sexualized stilettos and colorful dress of Roberta) she meets up with silver fox Diego (the family's financial advisor portrayed by Juan Pablo Medina) by the unimpressive staircase (See image 4, below). In classic melodrama, the staircase signals a fall from grace, and in *La casa*, the stairs foreshadow the impending doom. This particular scene, shot primarily in mid close up and in reverse shot reverse, insinuates fluidity in the present of the conversation between these two characters, which after exchanging pleasantries, focus on

<sup>23</sup> Paulina's peculiar speech pattern, consisting of elongated vowels and syllabic pronunciation of words, is a result of her drug use. In a later episode, she discloses to her psychologist and father (Paulina is the result of her mother's infidelity) that she is 'enganchadísima con el Tafil', a variant of Xanax.

monetary issues when Diego informs that Virginia (Verónica Castro) is over budget with the extravagant party. While Julián had a sexual introduction, Paulina is desexualized by her clothing choices, her business-first mentality, and her slow vocalization. Just like in *Desperate Housewives*, *La casa* reveals the contradictions of an upper-class family, clinging to maintain the appearances demanded by upper class society – and the cracks in its alleged ethical code.



*Image 3.2. Paulina and Diego, next to stairs*

In a later scene, the staircase returns to symbolize the downfall of Virginia's marriage (Image 3.5, below) for she has learned about her adulterous husband and that Roberta (suicide) is the other woman. With the camera angle looking down, emulating the sadness of Virginia, the character is positioned as walking down in a defeatist manner, gazing worriedly at the images of her family portraits on the wall, realizing her fractured family. In a greater scale, this technical fracture, with the association of the stairs in telenovelas, can be read as a critique that emphasizes the crumbling of hegemonic ideals of the heteronormative Family. Castro's previous roles in iconic telenovelas embodied

the classic abnegated, suffering and self-sacrificing mother figure, a conservative mother figure that “idealize the family as a unit whose preservation is worth all sacrifices” (López, pg. 154), yet, in *La casa*, her previous traditional and iconic motherly roles are displaced completely. Castro’s Virginia is a strongly opinionated and revengeful mother with a questionable moral compass, an adulteress, weed smoker, eventual drug dealer... Caro uproots Castro’s classic mother roles and complicates her new role where she is not a villain, nor a victim, but a complicated mother with strengths and flaws. Flaws and qualities hardly associated with the classic good mother figure. The series cleverly recontextualizes Castro’s classic telenovelas role and the clichés by inscribing her, decades later, in the very same genre but resignifying the matriarch as she descends the stairs to her symbolic failure. If Virginia de la Mora failed to be the classic mother figure, it is to no surprise, then, the subsequent failure(s) of her children.



*IMAGE 3.3. Virginia, after finding out about her adulterous husband.*

### *Sexuality and relationships*

Returning to the character of Julián, during the first episode, after many other melodramatic plotlines, the viewer discovers that Diego and Julián have a love affair and not a sexual adventure (like his introduction). Through formal filmic codes of intimacy, bisexuality is presented as more intimate and fulfilling than Julián's heterosexual opening act. The single shot scene (see Image 3.6 below) begins in a mid-close up of the two lovers sitting on Julián's bed as they hold hands, while Julián rest his head on Diego's shoulder. A nod to classic romantic intimacy displacing sexual acts. A recontextualized romantic intimacy of homonormativity. In Julián's opening scene, bodily contact is practical as when he picks up and places the girlfriend in the offscreen bed, disavowing any sign of romantic intimacy and implied uninterested sexual activity. Conversely, in this particular scene, homonormativity reigns the romantic storyline as they discuss living together and making plans for the future. The wiser and older Diego (already out of the closet) agrees to move "a donde tú quieras, pero no más secretos" as they romantically gaze into each other's eyes. The word *secretos* functions as both a suggestion for Julián to come out and to make their relationship public. The camera switches perspective and creates a more romantic and intimate atmosphere for the viewer. Aided by the slow extradiegetic music, the romantic scene ends with a tight close up of Diego and Julián kissing passionately and exchanging I love yous, before returning to the party. This scene is filled with intimate dialogues and futurity contrasting Julián's introduction

(disengaged, uninterested, aromantic) with the girlfriend. Naturally, the viewer, who has not seen the next episodes yet, would assume that this scene is more romantic because Julián is gay and not straight as he first appeared. Regardless of the problematics of sexual labels, the show, in its first episode sets up hopes for homonormative, through a mature and loving relationship, and then breaks those expectations, by questioning homonormativity and monogamy, in order to offer new possibilities for a queer family.



*Image 3.4. Julián and Diego, in a technically coded romantic setting*

This is a first attempt in the series at demonstrating the importance of not only bisexual relationships, but also, the importance and guidance a ‘queer family’ can bring to the table. The characters of Paulina (divorced, drug addict, mother of a drunk teenager, etc.) and Julián (unemployed, reproduces his father’s cheating, etc.) are clear examples of failed products of the heteronormative family and gender expectations, a family that was already in shambles as the show demonstrates. A failure the billboards for the second season promotion clearly exploit. If one recalls the opening Van Gogh quote with the word *normalidad*, a noun often referenced in heteronormative society as well as in queer

scholarship, it recalls the dichotomous relationship with the word abnormal from which the billboards ads for the season two promotion attests.

Since Netflix is a premium subscription service, *La casa* partakes in “outside the screen” commodities differently than the *Nueva novela mexicana*. For example, in part due to the nature of modern viewership, during the promotion of the second season of the show, the advertisements (online and billboards) appealed to both the local and international cultural commodities and ideologies of queer sexuality. In the clever #NoTeMetasConMiFamilia ads, the family trope, often found in Mexican melodrama, mixed cultural codes legible to an inter/national queer audience. Once the images and the visual narratives are decoded, the political tongue-in-cheek ads appropriate the very same conservative and queerphobic rhetoric found in heteronormativity. See for example the image (below, left), where the ad, showcasing the De la Mora children (Paulina [center] Julián [far left] and Elena [right]) and their partners in the background, tackles the normative, visually-center and striking rhetoric of the “familia original” (here implying Adam and Eve, or the conservative ideology of marriage as heterosexual). By utilizing an alternative definition of ‘original’ as unique, the ad resignifies the phobic language for its benefit by inscribing new meaning in the subtext and emphasize that they are indeed *original* because they are inimitable. In the middle image, the queer partnership of Paulina and María José (trans character in the show) are crossed by transphobic “esto no es natural” text. Similarly, the ad comically appropriates the conservative language, and subverts the phobic message to demonstrate an alternative to the very same phrase as the subtext confirms they are not *natural* because their beauty was enhanced with makeup

products. In the last image, partners Julián and Diego, the eye candy of the show, combat the machista language against homosexuality “esto no es un hombre” by emphasizing the fact that it is not ‘un hombre’ but ‘son dos’.



Image 3.7. Posters advertising the second season of *La casa de las flores*

The queer visibility, in both billboards and online activity ads, mocked and appropriated the very same conservative and queerphobic rhetoric that stems from classic *telenovelas* and *cine de oro* melodramas – but not without its own problematic representation. As opposed to the subgenre of *cabareteras*, where heavily insinuated (hetero)sexuality was allowed to a certain extent, the family melodramas, focused on the institution of proper and normative gender roles (and the implied problems of love, sexuality, and parenting) in a catholic and patriarchal structure of gendered relationships. It is in the genre of classic family melodramas where the figure of the asexual, saintly mother becomes “the central ideological tool for social and moral cohesion.” (López, pg. 154), a figure expected to disavow all identities other than motherhood and sacrifice herself for the preservation and reproduction of the *family unit* – and middle-class values. A particular

tradition Manolo Caro's work references while resignifying the same melodramatic aesthetics. On the one hand, the ads demonstrate the resignification and appropriation of the family traditions in the melodramas that inform the show, while, on the other, they also expose its entanglement with both local and global conversations of queer families and queer sexualities. This reordering subversion offers queer legibility through the consumption and reproduction of identity politics, a residual of the family structure of the past. *La casa* incorporates an array of aesthetic conventions to displace heteronormativity and present queer sexualities at the core of the show while still maintaining the family structure alive – melodrama at its finest!

### **La Casa de las Flores (II) and the Queer Family**

The second episode begins with the introduction of *la casa chica*, a cabaret, a business that Ernesto de la Mora began with his lover Roberta. A business that funded the luxurious lifestyle of the *casa grande* and even helped pay for the education and rent of the de la Mora kids. In true camp fashion, with its love for exaggeration, Roberta's wake (wakes are normally performed at the deceased home or a funeral home) is held at the cabaret surrounded by those she held dearest: the patrons, her older son Claudio and younger daughter Micaela (product of the adulterous Ernesto) and the fully realized entrepreneurs and iconic drag queens that kept the place alive: Yuri, Gloria Trevi, Paulina Rubio and Amanda Miguel. The wake is not a sad event but, as Claudio mentions, "una celebración de su vida". As such, the Paulina Rubio impersonator asks Paulina to say a few celebratory words.

When Paulina, in the middle of the dancefloor, takes the microphone to address the diverse crowd as club lights flash on and off, she begins with “quieeenes me conocean, sa-ben que no soy el al-ma de la fies-ta, solo a veces...” the shot reverse shot reveals both the crowd and the shock of Paulina’s family at this discovery, she continues “Y de-bo de-cir que fue Robertaa quien me enseñó a bai-lar<sup>24</sup>. Recuer-do muy bien que un día me di-jo” with a calculated dramatic pause, Paulina turns her gaze to the back, presumably to the DJ booth, as the beat to the 1991 “Muévelo” song begins to play. She faces the crowd again and pronounces “Mué-ve-lo, mué-ve-lo”. Filmed as a serious take, the crowd replies “que sabroso”, which are part of the lyrics, creating a comedic take. She repeats “Mué-ve-lo, mué-ve-lo” and the crowd, now infected by the energy of the song, and following Paulina’s delivery of “alza las manos si tu estas gozando”, begin to join her and raise their hands in solidarity (See Image 3.8 below). What is important to note, in this now iconic scene of the series, is the line “Roberta me enseñó a bailar”. In the previous episode, when Virginia confronts the adulterous Ernesto, she asks him “¿que viste en ella?” To which he responds “sabía bailar”. When Paulina mentions that phrase,

<sup>24</sup> The *tocaya* Paulina Rubio shares a parallel story of new found opportunities in the *casa chica* since Roberta “fue la primera persona que me dio la oportunidad de subirme a un escenario” when no one else would give her a job opportunity.

it is clear that the alternate queer world represented in *la casa chica* also functions as a space for producing alternative knowledge and subject formations.



*Image 3.8. Paulina performing “Muévelo”*

In *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Jack Halberstam deliberates that failure is about finding alternatives to approved methods of knowledge. As such, it is fundamental to find counterintuitive forms of resistance since traditional markers of success have been barred for queer subjects. Halberstam writes that the “heteronormative common sense leads to the equation of success with advancement, capital accumulation, family, ethical conduct, and hope” (pg. 89), and in this sense both Paulina and Julián *failed* and never achieved heteronormativity. However, this failure led them to the *casa chica*, a place filled with characters no longer bound to this linear mentality. Needless to say, *la casa chica* proved to be beneficial beyond the economic support that it provided, for it is precisely in this unexpected marginal space that a stronger sense of a family

and support system arises – a queer one at that! Since the beginning, *la casa chica* represents the queer alternative: a stronger family, a community for the *failed* subjects of heteronormativity. In this case, a community united through music that welcomes different manifestations of heteronormative *failures* to exist and flourish, like the entrepreneurial drag queens who will aid the De la Mora family navigate this alternative world more than once.

For example, in the third *capítulo*, not knowing how to come out, Julián decides to pay a visit to *la casa chica*. As Julián awkwardly enters backstage, he encounters both Paulina and Amanda in the process of transforming into their characters. Amanda engages “¿estás bien?”, still worried on how to ask, Julián goes straight to the point and answers back “Amanda, ¿tú eres gay?”. The “naked” identities of these performers mid transformation sets the mood for an honestly frank and tender conversation about the coming out process since “nunca es fácil decir verdades” as Amanda confirms, but continues that she follows her comadre Trevi’s advice “Me vesti de reina, me puse tacones... díselos cantando,” a reference to the LGBT anthem “Todos me miran” by Mexican pop legend and LGBTQ+ icon Gloria Trevi. Julián takes this advice in a literal sense, and with the help of his sister, sets up a coming out dinner with his family. Now transposed into the de la Mora’s dinner table, the whole family, including Diego, is interacting, while a nervous-looking Julián struggles to share his news.

With an encouraging push from his sister and the insistence of Diego, Julián stands up and “decidí decirles esto con una canción”. The camera dynamically alternates between multiple close up of the family members reacting to Julián’s words, and a long

shot that includes all the members present, only to end up focusing on a mid-close up shot of Julián as he continues “La gente me señala, me apunta con el dedo, susurra a mis espaldas y a mi me importa un bledo<sup>25</sup>” and begins to rhythmically create a beat with his right shoulder “que mas les da si soy distinto a ellos, no soy de nadie, no tengo dueño” when suddenly, the lighting turns to that of a night club, with reds and purples as the primary colors of the lip sync sequence. This self-conscious fantasy calls attention to the artistic nature of the scene as Julián imagines himself as a drag performer, transforming the dinner space into his stage as he hops onto the dinner table, movements that he learned and replicates from the alternating Gloria Trevi performance at the *casa chica* (See Image 3.9 and 3.91 below), movements that allow him to interact with his audience. As the chorus of the song heightens, so does Julián’s performance. What first started as a shy speech, soon becomes a natural performance like when he seductively grabs Diego’s tie and kisses him. He then proceeds to remove his shirt<sup>26</sup> as the iconic chorus begins “A quien le importa lo que yo haga, a quién le importa lo que yo diga, yo soy así, y así seguiré, nunca cambiaré” while his family cheers this spectacular performance. As the fantasy performance ends with the chorus,

<sup>25</sup> “¿A quien le importa?” (1986) is another quintessential LGBT anthem by the Spanish Alaska Y Dinarama and later covered in 2002 by the influential Mexican singer Thalía.

<sup>26</sup> I read this nakedness of the body as a metaphor linking his emotions and heart to a gay sensibility. In many other scenes he shares with Diego, he is naked. Yet, with his girlfriend in ‘intimate’ scenes, his upper body is always clothed as if afraid to be vulnerable with her.

signaled by the ‘natural’ lights, his family members applaud his bravery; Julián voices his bisexuality, a surprising revelation to his boyfriend.



Image 3.9. Gloria Trevi impersonator



Image 3.91. Julián's coming out fantasy

This coming out scene, lasting almost two minutes, creates an affective experience on the audience. Since Julián begins his journey as a failed reproduction of heteronormativity, through the alternative *casa chica* and grooming of his new alternative and queer community, he succeeds in his new identify formation as a new bisexual demonstrating that there are alternatives for legibility and success other than “heteronormative common sense”. For both Paulina and Julián, *la casa chica* embodies sensory queer liberation that manifests through the *bailar* and the eventual drag-inspired lip sync as a metaphor for physical liberation from heteronormativity. By referencing the metastructure of melodramas, *La casa* challenges tradition through artistic techniques and queer themes. Such as with the musical arrangement in which the “lighting, montage, visual rhythm, decor, style of acting, music... the ways mise-en-scene translates character into action” (Elsaesser, pg. 78) allows for the character to, as director Manolo Caro

expresses, “create emotional atmospheres and... understand through the senses rather than the intellect...the lyrics often serve to voice the words that the characters themselves should speak but cannot.” (as quoted in *Queer México*). The importance of this scene, in terms of LGBTQ representation, is that Julián’s story line manages to present and resolve the coming out and self-discovery narratives (often the climax of many queer films) within the first three episodes, acknowledging “post coming out” themes that question homonormativity and monogamy, like jealousy, polyamory, threesomes, etc.

### **Conclusion**

One must actively seek out queer commitments in areas that might not be obvious, in this case by paying closer attention to the critiques on cultural gender and sexual norms that could be overshadowed by the comedic elements in *La casa de las flores* which reflects general issues of both Mexican and US queer culture with a particular Latin American consciousness of gender and sexuality. This show differs from both the classic and *Nueva* telenovela and yet references both periods as inspiration for structure and themes only to undermine both. As a project, the LGBTQ representation of romantic love undermines and displaces the heteronormativity melodramatic tropes and structure, by reinscribing queer intimacy and community. At the same time, dealing with sexuality firsthand can be read as an active choice to demonstrate not only a modern perspective but also a sense of sophistication that contrast the very same Mexican melodramas and telenovelas it takes inspiration from. With this critique, the show cleverly puts

queer narratives in the eyes of its viewers, either for their first time, or to further create a dialogue with their knowledge on queer issues.

As per *la casa chica*, the critique here relies on both normative Mexican society and television for the lack of LGBTQ subject integration forcing the expelled subject to explore alternatives of not only acceptance, but also as a survival mechanism. Despite this criticism, there is also evidence of social change for there is explicit queer visibility in this televisive genre, which is slowly but surely, catching up to the more prolific queer cinema. But by using the less popular televisive melodramas, the show reintroduces the power it has when it comes to reproducing and challenging productions of gender and sexuality in México and Latin America at large.

With the advent of the internet and Netflix, the implications of freedom for the writers and director, allows for *La casa de las flores* to legitimize topics for public discourse. Through social media, as the show has proved to be very popular, it sparks international dialogues and creates space for the viewers to actively discuss the images presented and the way gender and sexuality are negotiated in order to resist the ‘heteronormative common sense’ of which Jack Halberstam speaks. Consequently, the way in which Julián and Paulina seek the *la casa chica*’s queer culture demonstrates a community willing to help each other thrive. A real-life queer culture and community that are part of the social and political conversations on sexual identity and liberation.

*“if you want them to know there is steak for dinner, you got to let them hear it sizzle.”*  
-Noxeema Jackson in *Too Wong Foo*

*“When “deviant groups” fight for “basic human goals of pleasure, desire, recognition, and respect,” they open up and mobilize a queer politics of dissent with prevailing norms that deny the value of their lives.”*  
- Mirelle Miller-Young

*“The world can be a cruel place.” “Yeah, it is cruel. God gave me a penis.”*  
-Alexandra and Sin-Dee in *Tangerine*

### **Disidentification and Queer worldmaking in *Tangerine***

It is a well-documented<sup>1</sup> fact that queer people, particularly transwomen, are more likely to encounter discrimination/violence solely on the base of their transness, or rather, their (in)ability to *pass*, or to *look* cisgender. Their visuality and physicality greatly determines their social inclusion/exclusion and their relation to sex work. Often, due to institutional failures in supporting transwomen, they experience transphobia/racism and social inequalities and “often drop out of school, experience high rates of unemployment due to lack of education and training, access to legal name changes, and past employment discrimination, poverty, social and family marginalization ...” (Sausa, et al, pg. 769). The lack of support (systemic, institutional, interpersonal) often paves a road towards sex work as means of economic survival and social reinforcement through communities found therein.

Additionally, sex work, besides a means of survival, is an economical venue for those trans subjects who want to transition via expansive (and expensive) operations, who

<sup>1</sup> For detailed analysis of systematic discrimination towards transwomen and the multiple forms they are affected by such biases (lack of financial opportunities, access to safe education with no harassment, etc.) refer to “The Interaction of Drug Use, Sex Work, and HIV Among Transgender Women” (Hoffman, 2014) and “Transgender Women and the Sex Work Industry: Roots in Systematic, Institutional, and Interpersonal Discrimination” (Nadal, Davidoff, Fujii-Doe, 2014). Many articles researching trans issues have discrimination/transphobia as the number one reason for lack of employment opportunities.

frequently rely on the quick turnaround of money that sex work can bring. Too often, gay and trans films focus on representing social violence and difficulties. Although essential to denounce social violence, these usual representations leave a bleak future of/for the queer subjects represented -if they survive the film.

For example, in *Dallas Buyers Club* (Dir. Jean-Marc Vallée, 2014) both a heterosexual and a transgender contract HIV, but only the transperson dies at the end of the film. Trans people are more than just their changing bodies, they are more than the ‘confusion’ their bodies create, that films often portray (*The Danish Girl*, Dir. Tom Hopper, 2015). Trans people are not tropes for the sensationalizing of their murder (*Boys Don’t Cry*, Dir. Kimberly Peirce, 1999); trans people are not only looking replicate heteronormative romantic love (*Boy Meets Girl*, Dir. Eric Schaeffer, 2014); trans people are more than the STIs they may contract through their sex work which leads to their eventual death (*Dallas Buyer Club*, Dir. Jean-marc Vallée, 2013). Trans people are more than the oppression and microaggression they continuously face (*Una mujer fantástica*, Dir. Sebastián Lelio, 2017). It is by no coincidence that any film not taking the negative representation route about trans issues is a breath of fresh air.

*Tangerine*, directed by Sean Baker, starring first-time actresses Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor as Sin-Dee and Alexandra respectively, tells a wild day of two transgender sex workers after Sin-Dee discovers that her pimp/boyfriend Chester cheated on her with a fish (cisgender female) while she was in jail. The film, with a focus on positive representation, portrays a loving friendship as the new form of kinship when the nuclear and heteronormative ‘family’ structure neglects to include the transperson.

In *Tangerine*, Sin-Dee and Alexandra have no other family but each other, demonstrating a connection other than ethnic or biological relations. The common factor in their kinship is their trans/sexuality. Although the race issue is backgrounded (Sin-Dee and Alexandra are Latinx and African American, respectively), the precarious economic and social situation is, according to the film, a result of racist and heterosexist discrimination. It is essential to point out that race, though ubiquitous, is not necessarily the driving force of the movie filmed in pluricultural Los Angeles.

It is imperative to highlight that *Tangerine* is not a result of the cinematic history of US melodramas<sup>2</sup>. Rather, the film stems from a space of experimental films (specifically the usage of iPhones to record) with a focus on the importance of representation and diversity with similarities to the aesthetics of New Queer Cinema and its active representation of queer life. Nevertheless, there are key moments in *Tangerine* that are reminiscent of Latin America's New Maricón Cinema and its use of the melodramatic, particularly in regard to queer sexuality. Additionally, the reason to include this film is the main characters are a prime example of what I am calling *unapologetic and raw queer sexualities* in a Latinx setting.

By emphasizing the poignant, tender and melodramatic sequences, I will demonstrate how *Tangerine* is similar to a melodrama (as it also questions notions of family and kinship) set in an urban space that uses contemporary street music (hip-hop

<sup>2</sup> Julianne Burton-Carvajal sees melodrama as a metagenre since melodrama spills over into most if not all genres, regardless of how the critic defines them. "Even when treated as a 'genre' in film studies, melodrama insists on asserting itself as a metagenre, one that subsumes and hybridizes with other generic categories" (qtd in Lahr-Vivaz, pg. 191).

and other urban beats) in order to showcase a variety of emotional states experienced by the main heroines. By *disidentifying* with mainstream queer cinema, the film demonstrates the resilience of these transindividuals and their flaunted version of success despite the material conditions in which they live. Following José Estebán Muñoz' notion of *disidentification*, I emphasize the imaginative modes of being within this filmic queer world by demonstrating the ways in which *Tangerine* queers the urban space, imagines other forms of belonging and affiliation, and the presentation and visualization of *transsexuality* in the astonishment of the everyday.

### *New Queer Cinema and its Renaissance*

In her famous 1992 article "New Queer Cinema," film scholar Ruby Rich described the NQC as a "new kind of film and video-making that was fresh, edgy, low-budget, inventive, unapologetic, sexy and stylistically daring" (pg. 131). NQC films were radical in form, aggressive in the presentation of sexual identities, and sharing a defiant attitude with proudly assertive protagonists. Aided by VHS technology, which allowed widespread distribution, NQC films were an "outrage and opportunity merged into a historic artistic response to insufferable political repression" (Rich, pg. 10). NQC elaborates on new accounts of the world, or rather, rarely portrayed stories, offering alternatives to embedded national hetero and homonormative maps, revising the flows and politics of cinema and queerness.

In *New Queer Cinema: The Director's Cut* (2013), Rich notes a significant shift in films with principal LGBTQ characters. Whereas the original NQC was popular in film festival circuits, the improvement of *digital* technologies, which have greatly improved

since the VHS, has produced a new wave of independently produced queer films that have entered mainstream audience and markets. These films include successful, award-winning quality art movies like *Brokeback Mountain* (Dir. Ang Lee, 2006), *The Kids Are All Right* (Dir. Lisa Colodenco, 2002) and *Milk* (Dir. Gus Van Sant, 2008). Dr. Stuart Richards notes that the films above are "conventional in form and follow the path of the literary quality film, where distribution companies co-opt culturally capital-rich elements to position the films as 'quality' art-house alternatives to mainstream blockbusters" (pg. 218). Richards considers these films "palatable and progressive for the mainstream audience" (ibid.) in contrast to the first NQC wave that broke dominant film form in both technique and content. Nonetheless, Richards notes a recent "renaissance of NQC" with progressive films (and not as radical as the original wave) like *Weekend* (Dir. Andrew Haigh, 2011), where a 'realistic' interaction between the protagonist and "formal cinematic codes deconstruct political norms" (pg. 221) by politicizing queer content. Another example is the coming-of-age film *Pariah* (Dir. Dee Rees, 2011). By circumventing the realization of underrepresented sexual desires, the core of the film focuses on achieving agency with the intersections of gender and race at the forefront (and not black lesbian sexuality).

It must be noted that most films under the NQC umbrella -and queer film studies in general- have cis-gay protagonists or focus in the evolution of the representation of gay character in films<sup>3</sup>. Although homosexuality, as a theme in both film and queer studies,

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the provocative and excellent *The Celluloid Closet* (1981) by Vito Russo in which he critiques homosexual representation in Hollywood films since, as the author argues, Hollywood films showcase homosexuality as limited, nonsexual, and one-dimensional. Scholar Michael Schuessler notes a

has benefited from multiple forms of representations, lesbianism, as a film theme, is not as popular as male homosexuality, and the handful of lesbian-themed films proves this. When it comes to trans\* representation in film, it becomes even more limited in scope, quality, and quantity. Early (and troublesome) representation of trans\* characters in Hollywood films included the "sensational [gender] freaks" or villainous "psycho killers" like in *Glen or Glenda* (Dir. Ed Wood, 1953) or *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde* (Dir. Roy Ward Baker, 1971) who were depicted as "a freakish spectacle that would increase ticket sales" (Smith, pg. 2). These previous trans representation created misconceptions and myths. "Hollywood films not only reflect, but also manufacture and encourage attitudes..." as Lily Tomlin, narrator of *The Celluloid Closet*, mentions, "Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people and gay people what to think about themselves." (*Celluloid*, 3:14).

Although the groundbreaking film (based on the eponymous *The Celluloid Closet* [1981] by Vito Russo) focuses on gay and lesbian in film, the author concludes that most gay and lesbian characters, when present, were there as "something to laugh at, or something to pity, or even something to fear" (*Celluloid*, 2:41). When it comes to the limited trans representation, the same is concluded. Considering that most people are exposed to transness through film, these first movies 'taught' that transness is an 'inappropriate behavior' that needs punishment, and consequently, killed for their transgressions, *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), i.e. This trope of punishing and killing those who

similar pattern in Latin American films. See *México imaginado: Nuevos enfoques sobre el cine (trans)nacional* (2011).

transgress the sexual/gender binary parallels early Latin American films dealing with queerness (an anachronic labeling in my part) like the killing of La Manuela in *El lugar sin límites* (Dir. Arturo Ripstein, 1978). Of course, it is necessary to keep in mind that films must be grounded historically to their local, national politics. As such, not all films are viewed or decoded according to the original encoded intention<sup>4</sup>.

For example, the viewer may decide to perform disidentification, just as José Esteban Muñoz notes in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999), which is “a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously” (pg. 5). According to Muñoz, *disidentification* is “about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component” (pg. 29), it is about recycling and rethinking just as much as it is about scrambling and reconstructing the cultural encoded message. It is precisely through the process of disidentification that minoritarian subjects expose “the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identification” (pg. 31). In other words, although the trans subjects were made to die, the films did offer opportunities for affirming transgender lives, even if only temporarily, before the ending, like in traditional melodrama, forces a violent return of heteronormativity and/or patriarchal order.

<sup>4</sup> For a greater analysis on how encoding/decoding function (stemming from Althusser), refer to *La casa de las flores* chapter where a more in-depth analysis allows for feminist critique (Ana M. Lopez, “Tears and desires) and homoerotics (Sergio de la Mora, *Cinemachismo*) to be decoded from normative films.

Whereas early trans films were utilized pedagogically (whether actively or subliminally) as tools to inform viewers of acceptable gender behaviors and punishments for transgressions, contemporary (often independent) films are showcasing visibility for trans characters in a more rounded and positive -albeit at times problematic- perspectives. For example, in México, the transgender documentary<sup>6</sup> is a current phenomenon as film critic Paul Julian Smith notes. Documentaries like *Quebranto* (Dir. Roberto Fiesco, 2013), *Made in Bangkok* (Dir. Flavio Florencio, 2015) and *Morir de Pie* (Dir. Jacaranda Correa, 2011) represent "transnational narratives [that] break out of the barriers of subjectivity (the hallmark of an individual history) to embrace an analysis of intersubjectivity... all are self-proclaimed stories of love. All three are relatively optimistic stories of strength and survival." (Smith, pg. 96). These newer films "imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities" (Muñoz, pg.1) represent a complex queer world.

Current and progressive trans films in the US had to step away from the Hollywood film factory in order to tell their voices and experiences, just like the first wave of NQC that responded to the political climate of the AIDS epidemic and lack of governmental support. In addition to a different political climate, filmmakers from the last decade have benefited from the advancements in technology in both filming

<sup>5</sup> In her article *The Representation of Trans Women in Film and Television* (2017), Reitz considers the 2015 film *The Danish Girl* a troublesome representation of transness. Not only was the main character Lili Elbe portrayed by a cisgender person (Eddie Redmayne), but the film, instead of focusing on the trans experiences, highlights "the crisis that coming out trans inflicts on the cis people around them: (Reitz, pg. 4) shifting the focus to the 'loss' of Gerda's husband after transitioning.

<sup>6</sup>When it comes to reception of these films, I must admit that often, these films, and many contemporary Mexican/Latinx queer productions circulate in global festivals or online platforms, thus there is limited accessibility.

equipment, and film editing apparatus, which has allowed for independent filmmakers and films like *Tangerine* to work on and against mainstream queer films (that often sensationalize queer despair) by showcasing the transformative powers of transsexuality.

### *Queering the family*

In *The Feeling of Kinship* (2010), Dr. David L. Eng mentions how adoptions "consolidate the social and psychic boundaries of white middle-class nuclear families in the global north by shoring up Oedipal ideals of family and kinship not only for heterosexual but also, and increasingly, for homosexual couples and singles" (pg. 20), where once again, the idea of the "white middle-class nuclear family" expands to include non-heterosexuals and single parents. For LGBTQ parents, homonormativity (which implies policing their sexuality) often is the only form to be lawfully recognized as subjects. Since the heteronormative family unit is still "a structuralist legacy privileging certain forms of kinship as the only intelligible, communicable, reproducible, and livable one" (Eng, pg. 16), many LGBTQ members must sacrifice and dilute their sexual difference in order to be considered respectable, claim their humanity, and gain political recognition. To become bodies that matter (to borrow Butler's term), they must replicate heterosexual relationalities. Thus, recognition is fundamentally related to the 'proper' body birthed by the bourgeoisie family model. Similarly, homonormativity, the act of becoming legible and palatable subjects to mainstream society, appeals to the 'family' rhetoric to extend its original limits and include alternative structures. Nevertheless, in this very same process, the potential of subversion is contracted in the act of assimilation.

For example, the films *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmark* (Dir. Beban Kidron, 1995) and *Paris is Burning!* (Dir. Jennie Livingston, 1990) are two landmark films showcasing queer kinship in US-centric films. Whereas the former is a mixed-race drag queen comedy film, the latter, a documentary, exemplifies, among other things, some of the hardships many queers of color face in a homophobic/transphobic society. In both *To Wong Foo* and *Paris*, the idea of family is vital for the survival of the queer subjects. The chosen-family (an alternative to biological family) represented in the films is performed through a faux mother-daughter relationship where the more experienced drag queen(s) or transperson mentors the 'daughter' or the 'son.' This parent-child relationship and structure replicates the filial ideal from cisgender heteronormative society, in which there is a home and at least one parent-figure. Although the main interest for this chapter is the power structure implied in family/kinship, it is important to note that often queer subjects are expelled from their biological family at a young age. Thus, the need for a parent-figure to provide guidance and any sense of security. Additionally, fear of losing their biological family and stability is a reason many queer people remain in the closet, a fear often found in Latinx communities just like some of the Mariachi Arcoiris interviews revealed.

In the case of *To Wong Foo*, the normative family structure is queered by the insertion of two older and experienced interracial parents/drag queens: Noxzema Jackson (Wesley Snipes) and Vida Boehme (Patrick Swayze). The film begins with Noxzema and Vida tying for the win in New York's "Drag Queen of the Year" contest, winning an opportunity to snatch the crown in the bigger "Miss Drag Queen of America" pageant.

During the New York contest, they meet Chi-Chi Rodriguez (John Leguizamo), an inexperienced 'drag princess' (as the drag mothers call her) filled with the potential of becoming a full-fledged drag queen. Thus, Chi-Chi becomes the Latinx protege/daughter in this interracial drag family, the daughter that needed guidance from her drag parents to achieve queenhood, which, in the film, translates to stardom by winning the final competition - and propagate the family name legacy. Consequently, *To Wong Foo* represents the idea of an interracial and queered family, a family where there is no blood relation but still manages to reproduce itself by maintaining the name/legacy/family structure often found in drag culture. Heteronormativity's inherently limited discourse of biological reproduction is displaced by the (re)production of subjects through nurture. For a 1995 film<sup>7</sup>, *To Wong Foo* is revolutionary for not dealing with dying men, considering that historically it was the decade following the AIDS epidemic and the cocktail era. Alternatively, the film features three healthy, multi-ethnic, proud, and unapologetic (assumed gay) drag queens. Although the film depicts a multiracial cast, it does not deal with race issues.

Similarly, *Paris is Burning!* continues the importance of 'family' with the added notion of "houses" along ethnic lines. Houses that have a double function: first, these homes are a surrogate family structure for the members (many of them narrate their expulsion from the biological home at an early age) and, second, these houses are an affiliated group for voguing competitions in ballroom dances. The importance of these

<sup>7</sup> Historically speaking, post the 1980's AIDS boom, the decade of the 90s is considered the decade of the 'cocktail' when the drug AZT combated the death-sentence of the AIDS epidemic, allowing for longer life spans, decreasing the burden in HIV positive patients.

new families/houses are priceless since they sustain "those who belong to the houses in the face of dislocation, poverty, homelessness" (Butler, 392). Whereas *to Wong Foo* appropriates and queers the normative family structure, *Paris* resignifies the 'family' by emphasizing a culturally re-elaborated kinship. In *Paris*, they "'mother' each other, 'house' one another, 'rear' one another" (ibid.), essentially, this chosen family becomes a social community for the survival of the 'adopted' children in the hostile and queerphobic world they inhabit. Whereas the traditional family structure is an ideological apparatus to sustain heteronormative and patriarchal structures, queer kinship, albeit its inclusive reformulations, reveals the 'family' as a site of clashing tensions. Whether heterosexual or queer, biological or chosen-family, a vertical and uneven power structure<sup>9</sup> is evident and maintained in the parent(s)-child(ren) figuration and further complicated when intersected by race. In the process of disidentifying with such structures, *Tangerine* dares to imagine a world in the present, in the everyday, and in the local struggles of resistance offering a kernel of possibility for an alternative arrangement.

*Tangerine* provides a fresh take on trans representation by providing sororal love as an answer to the cruelty in the world. What is more important to highlight is that the

<sup>8</sup> Butler in "Gender is Burning" further elaborates the inability for queer subjects, to achieve 'straight' access to the world using the murder of Venus Xtravanza as an example. Similarly, scholar Dr. Elizabeth Freeman notes that the liberal discourse of 'chosen-family,' often queer rhetoric, is queer unfriendly since "it presumes a range of economic, racial, gender, and national privileges to which many sexual dissidents do not have access -often by virtue of their sexual dissidence itself" (Freeman, pg. 304).

<sup>9</sup> In this chapter I engage in the different ways *Tangerine* destabilizes the Family structure often found in films. I am aware of the social difficulties and need for many queers to find a family/mother structure/figure. Many are expelled from home at an early age and need to look/find a family/mother figure for survival. Again, *Paris is Burning* is a great example of the importance of the Mother/parent figure, for they not only nurture but also are the main source of income. The parent figure "who, regardless of age, sexual orientation, and social status, provide a labor of care and love with/for numerous black and Latino/a LGBTQ people who have been rejected by their blood families, religious institutions, and society at large." (Bayley and Richardson, pg. 118)

love presented is not romance nor self-love (which the main characters possess) but rather the emphasis on love for friendship. Why put each other down when there is enough love to go around? Their differences are exactly why their friendship is strong. This film underlines precisely the need to acknowledge the differences between queer subjectivities in order to strengthen the communi-*ties*, even in two-person relationships. Ties that queers have not only to one another but also at a larger scale with any and all communities.

### **Vulnerability, hope and community in the everyday in *Tangerine***

Whereas most films deal with the 'identity crisis' of assuming the (trans)gender they are, *Tangerine* focuses on TWO transgender women of color who sidestep that bildungsroman trope typical of LGBTQ+ films. Instead, the film offers the viewer two fully realized characters with typical dreams and aspirations, where their heartbreak is produced by loving a man, not by body dysmorphia. With this film, there are two mature transwomen dealing with daily life. They do encounter different types of violence (for example, their misgendering by the police, lack of employment opportunities, johns trying to bargain prices, etc.) as part of their life. However, it is not a defining moment for their character, but rather a critique of violence that many trans folk face.

The positive connotations of affectivity between the multiethnic material-discursive bodily production of Sin-Dee and Alexandra, the protagonists of *Tangerine*, forge an unanticipated support network. The climax of the film presents the viewer with an unexpected twist in their friendship: Sin-Dee learns that Alexandra slept with Chester, Sin-Dee's boyfriend, while she was in jail. As expected, a despondent fight occurs

between the two heroines. As Alexandra apologizes, explaining that it meant nothing, Sin-Dee simply and gloomily interjects and utters, "you two deserve each other" as they walk in opposite directions. Sin-Dee, in need of cash, walks to a corner hoping to find a trick, a john. Unfortunately, Sin-Dee encounters a couple of transphobic cismen in a car who enforce disciplinary violence by yelling out transphobic remarks and proceed to bathe her in piss they were holding in a cup as they drive away. Alexandra overhears Sin-Dee screaming in disgust and quickly returns to her. This particularly violent episode is the setup for the most poignant and tender scene of the film, for Alexandra guides Sin-Dee to a nearby laundry mat to wash her clothes and hair.

As Sin-Dee begins to remove her clothes, her vulnerability begins to show. She grabs her wig and pauses, as if the wig is a signifier and identity of her femininity. This impactful scene caters to the emotional range of both the actress and the viewer for this convincing performance, invites the viewer to experience a vulnerable queer body. While Sin-Dee has always been a confident woman, now that her wig is off, she is reminded of her incomplete transformation. Alexandra, knowing the vulnerability and exposure of the situation, decides to symbolically return Sin-Dee's femininity and offers her the wig. This resonates with traditional melodramas, since the protagonists are ordinary characters rising above the effects of tragedy, often through serious and violent actions gives voice to "marginalized groups, to provide aesthetic and emotional satisfaction, to spur reform, and to innovate on its basic premises." (Kelly, n.p.). An affective scene filled with vulnerability hardly found in transfilms that appeals across gender, class, racial and national boundary lines.

The film instead of framing the characters as victims -breaking from traditional melodrama where the protagonists are always the victim of exterior forces- presents them as positive and vulnerable, allowing the viewers to connect with them as human beings, as opposed to objects of study -like other films have done previously. By allowing their humanity to exist, *Tangerine* “Forge[s] bonds between individuals that will lead them to self-identify as part of a larger community and, perhaps, a nation. (Lahr-Vivaz, pg. 12), empathetically feeling their friendship. In the end, these forgiving friends understand each other and realize that their friendship is infinitely more important than any man in their lives. The closing shot of the film (See Images 4.1 and 4.2, below) portrays these two loving friends holding hands, with Alexandra wigless but smiling as she sees her beautiful friend Sin-Dee feeling empowered, once again, with her wig. This touching ending conveys not only the hardiness of these characters, but also the resilience of friendship as a critical factor in their lives.



*Image 4.2. Alexandra looking at Sin-Dee lovingly as they feel the love for each other.*



Image 4.1. Alexandra lends Sin-Dee her wig so she can feel fierce while they wait.

The film leaves the viewer with a hopeful future for these two beautiful human beings that allowed the viewer to enter their vulnerable lives, creating complicated and well-rounded characters that will be hard to forget. By the end of the film, this work of art engages with global conversations around queer lives. *Tangerine* demonstrates and redefines queer and trans politics of family and identity through intersectionality and love. Forms of affectivity that manifest differently than mainstream homonormative global movements, so often concerned mainly with state-sanctioned financial benefits related to relationship acknowledgment.

### **Queering the Urban Space**

In the collaboration of friendship, Sin-Dee and Alexandra, the main characters of *Tangerine*, create new forms of relationships in the limited space of Los Angeles' streets. A queer friendship built on strength and subversion to “think, feel, experience, share, resist together and lead to the emergence of queer sociality” (Chatterjee, np). Although *Tangerine* introduces these characters as passive individuals, as they are sitting down in the first scene of the film, the viewer quickly starts seeing and hearing them move around

the city in different modes of transportation. Through the physical movement of Sin-Dee and Alexandra, this upbeat, fast-paced, urban melodrama takes the viewer on a tour of Los Angeles (See Images below). The viewer encounters a plethora of characters, lives, and struggles, *hearing and feeling* the city in multiple languages while experiencing it through different forms of travel: walking, going up and down escalators, taking the bus, the train, etc. The film, through its sensorial configuration, forms intimacy and proximity that permits a representation of transwomen by transwomen.



*Image 4.3. Alexandra on her way to get ready for her performance*



*Image 4.4. Sin-Dee on her way to the train station*



Image 4.5. Sin-Dee in the middle of a busy intersection

Moreover, the relatability from/to the characters also comes from the script since it is voiced from a trans perspective. Both Kiki Rodriguez and Mya Taylor<sup>10</sup> (Sin-Dee and Alexandra respectively) were not only inspiration for the script but contributed with personal anecdotes and provided approval every step of the way. They insisted the film be "extremely realistic and show the brutal reality of what these women have to deal with, the hardships, everything that comes with being a trans woman of color sex worker. She (Mya) told me she wanted the movie to be laugh-out-loud funny. She said, 'When you're on the corner there's humor out there and I want the movie to be entertaining.'" (Baker quoted in Kinser). As a result, *Tangerine* breathes life and represents two transwomen of color, their friendship, support, and resilience in a society that shuns and alienates racial and sexual/gender difference.

Additionally, both the diegetic and extradiegetic sounds allow the viewer to hear the sounds and view the surfaces and spaces of the urban Los Angeles through a trans perspective in key scenes to follow. The visibility these characters create in public spaces demonstrates an organic production of material-discourse that politicizes forms of

<sup>10</sup> Baker, in the research process, enlisted both Kiki and Mya's personal experiences (as well as their friends') into the script, the liberty was so that Mya ultimately guided the 'mood' of the film "I told Sean I wanted the story to be very real and I wanted it to be very funny because, like, who wants a theater full of crying people?" (Gross, 2015).

(trans)subjectivity in unexpected public locations. Nevertheless, with such visibility, how are the subjects creating discourse and possibility for new forms of affectivity and relationships in a tumultuous environment?

*Tangerine* portrays queerness as fully functional AMONGST society, not excluded from it. The characters and their material discourse present queerness as part of mainstream society, for these discourse-bodies, transformed by estrogen, are living testaments of their poor, queer and racial resistance in a society that refuses to acknowledge them. More importantly, the film grants these transindividuals a public physicality (rarely granted in trans films) full of energy, life and emotionally complex political subjects.

In one pivotal scene, the body is on full display, not only to heteronormative society as a trans\* other but also as a political, living testament of transformation (of ideas as much as bodies, ideologies, of family structure). Without objectifying<sup>11</sup>, the camera often frames the women as attractive, by showing off their physique, accentuating their body but never in a voyeuristic manner, rather, respectfully and appreciatively, a nod to their beauty without an intention to sexualize nor objectify. (See Image 4.6,

<sup>11</sup> In her famous “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1973), Mulvey notes that in classic cinema women (given the publishing date, her references are heteronormative) have an “appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact ... can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness” (pg. 19), an objectification and sexualization by the male gaze. When it comes to the representation of transwomen bodies, most films look and find signifiers that emphasize their otherness “cinema exposes trans women’s bodies in order to stake out the limits of what bodies and genders are considered worthy and acceptable” (Groothuis, n.p.), therefore, most storylines engage with the transcharacter being able to pass/not pass as cisgender, often, the physical reveal (whether by choice or forced), through visual language, continues and “marginalizes the transgender population by engaging in — and thus perpetuating — certain processes of misgendering, Other-ing, and cissexist lines of thought.” (ibid.)

below). To a greater extent, since the opening scene, *Tangerine* explores and naturalizes the process of *transformation* of their femaleness with constant references to medical procedures of feminization. *Tangerine* stages a positive portrayal of transwomen who are both informed but not defined by the binary conception of femaleness. On the contrary, whereas many films *hide and then show* the penis as part of a revealing/twist and dehumanizing plot line (for it implies that transwomen are only what is between their legs), *Tangerine*, by actively referencing gendered/sexualized parts, reinscribes new cinematic meaning with a positive twist for it is their vocal reveal of their genitals that create a comedic and refreshing representation of filmic trans life. Although their feminization comes from an understanding of a binary gender system, the vocalization of their gender discourse interrupts any congruency in the category of gender, a gender category that both Alexandra and Sin-Dee constantly reference and constantly disrupt.



*Image 4.6. Sin-Dee bends over to see her friend's butt and overall physical change through hormones. Alexandra speaks with a friend and invites them to her performance.*

In this particular shot, Sin-Dee and Alexandra meet two other queer friends in the street. They try to uncover the whereabouts of a cheating boyfriend, but quickly switch topics and ogle each other's bodies and the physical changes that occurred during Sin-

Dee's one-month stint in jail. This particular scene demonstrates not only the network and connections among queers of color but also the importance of showcasing the trans body. Not only is the viewer of the film learning about trans life (as *Tangerine* is one specific, controlled demonstration), but also the trans people in the film are learning the different ways that estrogen is working in/on their bodies. In the image above, one can gather how Sin-Dee and Alexandra meet two other friends while Sin-Dee leans forward to get a closer look at the unnamed friends' rumps. After the estrogen, her glutes are fuller and rounder, causing Sin-Dee to admire the progression of her friend's transformation since they last saw each other. The film, without moralizing, shows the importance of the physical body, showcasing unapologetic trans bodies in their full glory, full of life. The colorful<sup>12</sup> background matches the energy and multiplicity of their livelihood instead of a violent and less vibrant representation<sup>13</sup>.

*Tangerine* plays with underrepresented trans depictions. These trans bodies of color question the central narrative of colored women as "desirable and undesirable objects: desirable for their supposed difference, exoticism, and sexual potency, and undesirable because these very same factors threaten or compromise governing notions of feminine sexuality, heterosexual relations, and racial hierarchy" (Miller-Young 14).

<sup>12</sup> The director Baker said in an interview for The Verge that "With a lot of these social realist films, the first thing you do is drain the color, we went the other way. We pumped the colors and put the saturation through the roof. Just because the world there is so colorful, and the women are so colorful. We wanted it to match them." (Orange emerged as the dominant color in the film, inspiring its title.)

<sup>13</sup> For example, in the film *Transamerica*, Bree, the main trans character of the film, is predominantly shown in pink hues, as if transwomen only live in pink (that is to assume palatable femininity symbolically through the color). In contrast, the leading ladies in *Tangerine* try every color of the crayon box.

*Tangerine*, uninterested in identitarian politics, instead, places the heroines *post-identity* (it is not a bildungsroman of trans characters) *and* focuses on friendship and the resilience of these queer characters in a 'normal' day with 'average' problems like finding the whereabouts of the cheating boyfriend.

The central topics and narratives in *Tangerine* push beyond typical trans-topics in melodramas such as the murder of transpeople or sexually transmitted infections. Although sex work, a trope often found in transfilms, is not a primary concern in *Tangerine* the backgrounded issues are a critique of heteronormative society. Yet, the characters are not affected nor defined by sex work, it is treated as a regular job with its positives and negatives. Instead of having sex work be the focus, the film chooses to represent the strong bond and friendship between these individuals for THEY. ARE. NOT. ALONE. That, in itself, is groundbreaking, as most films dealing with trans issues showcase a lonely and alienated trans individual. Rarely are two transindividuals (of color nonetheless) forming a bond or a friendship in any film.

### **Reframing transsexuality**

*Tangerine* offers one of the longest non pornographic sex scenes for any transsexual character in US films. Many sexual encounters between a trans person and their partner have previously been shown in a strictly transactional manner- more often than not, it is nothing more than a bodily transaction for cash. One of a few Latin American films showcasing passionate trans sexuality (an anachronic labeling on my part) is in *El lugar sin límite* (Dir. Arturo Ripstein, 1978), with La Manuela and Pancho. However, the erotics of this film are closeted, as Pancho does not assume his

transgressive sexuality, and thus, his transgression, or rather La Manuela's transgression, culminates in the latter's death. Of course, considering the film was from a prior epoch, it is still a revolutionary film in its questioning of heterosexuality and acknowledgment of transsexuality. Another example of explicitly implicit trans sex is *El beso de la mujer araña* (Dir. Hector Babenco, 1985), wherein Molina and her love interest engage in coitus; however, this presentation of sex is very much hidden from the viewer, happening in the darkness of the night/jailcell and only heavily implied. Similarly, the current hit show *Pose* (2018-) does insinuate trans intercourse but considering it is on a mainstream network the scenes are short in length.

In *Tangerine*, Alexandra has two scenes involving sex work and romance. In the former, the viewer encounters a 'pick up' encounter, where a male, a john, is actively seeking Alexandra for sex. This particular scene highlights the epistemic challenges of a binary language, a binary language that creates body-discourses through language. That is to say, the acknowledgment of a subject because it can be named. In this scene, Alexandra encounters a white cisgender male in his car and asks to see his penis. According to the film, asking to see the penis is routine to make sure they are not a cop, and thus avoid being jailed. After the john shows his penis (and proof that he is not a cop), Alexandra steps into the vehicle of the man seeking a 'Christmas release, my fucking family has me stressed out, " as he asks for a bbbj (condomless blowjob). Alexandra refuses since she does not engage in unprotected sexual activity. As the unnamed male tries to negotiate a lower rate (since it is Christmas and he spent money on gifts), Alexandra, in need of money and in the Christmas spirit, concedes to a handjob (as

blowjobs cost more). However, the male cannot get fully erect, and Alexandra wants to get her money since it is not her fault that he cannot sustain an erection. The male reacts violently and takes her money. Alexandra takes the keys and exits the car.

Now arguing in the street, the john starts to violently grab her arms in an attempt to get his keys back. At that moment, Alexandra, with a pointed tone, emphasizes to the male, "you forgot I got a dick too" to remind him of not only her physical strength but also as a sign of self-reliance on her body to protect herself. This altercation destroys the masquerade of the gender system through the john's emasculation since her "I got a dick too" exclamation not only metaphorically castrates the flaccid john but also critiques the crumbling binary gender system once again. Here, the penis is resignified. Whereas in most trans films the penis is a reminder of "incomplete" transformation (see for example *Transamerica* where bottom reconstructive surgery at the end of the film completes her gender transformation) in *Tangerine* the penis is part of her identity - and an important part of her sex work. By reminding the male of her penis, Alexandra engages in the organic production of queer bodies by reminding not only the man but also the viewer, that some females do, indeed, have penises.

Where most transfilms dedicate most of the time to the characters discovering the transperson's genitalia as a narrative device, often the climax of the film<sup>14</sup>, *Tangerine* actively, and rather quickly, answers that indeed they do! And the penis does not make

<sup>14</sup> For example, in the film *XXY* (Dir. Lucia Puenzo, 2011), throughout the film multiple characters question Alex, the main protagonist, regarding their genitalia.

them any less woman<sup>15</sup>. By analyzing and providing aesthetic, rhetorical, and queer ideology, the humanity and vulnerability of the main characters seeps into the entirety of the film. Though this multi-level exploration of the LA trans (and sex worker) community, the film allows the viewer exposure to different micro-cultures, which are, arguably, underground for many of its viewers.

The film highlights much-needed diversity in queer storyline representations — diversity in the sense of showcasing different bodily manifestations, which ultimately will lead to original storylines. There is a sense of living, not only through the camera work and the soundtrack, but also through the constant motion of the main characters in *PUBLIC*. The perspective of these marginalized transwomen is a central characteristic of the film, as they retake the public space, they remap the city from the a minoritarian perspective. The tracking shots almost seem outpaced by the liveliness, energy, and motion speed of the main characters. In the case of this film, the push for original queer content culminates in an array of queer friendships and non-romantic love, harshly contrasting the tradition of films with transcharacters.

Another impactful scene in terms of sexual representation of *transsexuality* is the love scene between Alexandra and the Arminian Razmik, a taxi driver and frequent client. The viewer first encounters Razmik as he picks up an African American sex

<sup>15</sup> Paul Preciado notes how "science has established its material authority by transforming the concepts of the psyche, libido, consciousness, femininity, and masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality, intersexuality and transsexuality into tangible realities." (pg. 34) concepts *Tangerine* plays with through intelligent and discreet criticisms by often resignifying the transbody. Furthermore, the characters and the film interpellate, only to break apart, the normative gender constructions in these particular scenes where hierarchical and power structures are challenged. With the theoretical reading of queerness backgrounded, the film elicits positive affectivity.

worker in Santa Monica and Highway Boulevard, an area known for trans sex workers. However, to Razmik's great surprise, the woman turns out to be a 'real fish', a cisgender woman. New in town, she was not aware she was in a trans sex work zone. Angry at realizing she is 'real fish,' Razmik kicks her out of the car. After this boisterous event, Razmik drives away. Eventually, he finds Alexandra and is ecstatic as she jumps into his car, greeting him happily. He proceeds to drive Alexandra around and enters an automatic car wash, to which Alexandra comments, "I think this is becoming our favorite spot," implying that this routine has occurred multiple times. Per the medium shot, the scene, shot aesthetically romantic, begins during a beautiful orangey Californian afternoon as the car enters the automatic car wash. The camera is positioned in the backseat of the taxicab gives immediate intimacy to what is about to elapse. As soon as they are inside the dark tunnel, Razmik (left) begins to fellate Alexandra for over a minute of an almost interrupted afternoon delight. The viewer *experiences* the full car wash cycle, which I read as a metaphor of the oral job: the car getting wet, cleaned, and blown-dried. The diegetic noise created by the car wash machine add to the realistic portrayal as Razmik's head ecstatically bobs up and down over Alexandra's penis, as she caresses his back while he performs (See Image 4.7, below). This scene, framed in a medium shot, contrast an obscured Rasmik against the splashing of white foam that

covers the windshield, a splashing reminiscent of a specific bodily fluid that can occur during oral sex.



*Image 4.7. Razmik performs oral sex on Alexandra in the iconic automatic car wash scene.*

Additionally, the *functioning* penis of Alexandra works to further critique the john in the previous scene where he might be a conventional/binary cismale but just like his penis, his oppressive heteronormative system no longer works. Instead, the queer phallus, presented by the transwoman of color specifically, reigns triumphant in this reimagining of queer futurity. A bodily discourse of gender difference that reevaluates the cinematic tradition of seeing transwomen bodies as less-than-real-women. Alexandra's and Sin-Dee's femininity is a source of reevaluation and meaning beyond the erotic.

The fact that the film showcased such a long (trans)sexual scene of positive and loving affectivity among these two people demonstrates precisely the need to move beyond the typical tropes of trans films. Not only to push for new themes but also to highlight the diversity of trans experiences as part of the gender and sexual landscapes. This particular scene demonstrates how trans individuals also have sex in a positive and

natural light, not only sex for work or the social symbolizations and political meanings of rape (*Boys Don't Cry*, 1999). Instead, the film alludes to transindividuals that can and do have a sex drive; they can and do have positive experiences while engaging sexually with other people.

As Razmik parks the taxi after the carwash, Alexandra goes to the store and buys a car scent. "You didn't have to do this" says Razmik, "Yes, I did, Merry Christmas," responds Alexandra, as Razmik hangs the tangerine-shaped car freshener in his car mirror. In addition to explicit sexual representation, this titular scene overflows the sex work logic in several ways. At first, the role reversal creates tension for it is Razmik actively performing oral sex on Alexandra, an unexpected, but welcoming, twist. Secondly, although there can be an assumed economic relationship, in this scene, there are no discussions regarding the monetary transaction (as opposed to the scene with the john I previously mentioned). In this scene, sex work obfuscates the capitalistic implications therein since the only visible economic transaction is the one Alexandra completes when she gifts Rasmik the tangerine-shaped car freshener. A role reversal since Alexandra is not the one receiving, but rather, giving an exchange for the sexual encounter. Sex work is typically a means of survival for trans individuals, yet this particular scene erases sex work as equal to money. Instead, it humanizes, with positive affectivities, the relationship between Razmik and Alexandra, who are more than just in business.

Razmik and Alexandra flourish and blossom into a beautiful scene both semantically and cinematographically. Positive affectivity supersedes the dehumanizing

and economic exchange perceptions of sex work. This act of unexpected kindness on Alexandra's part shows not only her compassion and humanity but also the human connection she has with her (presumably), frequent customer. For is not only the trans individual humanized but also the client. Contrasting the john, Razmik is not a portrayal of a selfish and sexually careless individual, but rather, as someone who also cares for the person he is routinely engaging with sexually. It is important to note that in this particular scene, there was no talk of money nor was money in sight, nor condom talk like in the previous sex scene, further emphasizing the human connection between these two characters- it is not just a financial relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Contrasting with usual representations, *Tangerine* at first instance demonstrates a close-knit family unit, even if it is a community of two. However, the viewer soon discovers the network of transindividuals helping each other survive the political and social climate that expels their subjectivity from the US body politic. Most importantly, *Tangerine* humanizes both characters with a storyline meant to represent an 'ordinary day' in the life of these two individuals. The film, instead of making a spectacle, humanizes and normalizes transsexuality. What is compelling about this film is the positive image of a world not dealing with the murder of trans people, where the violence portrayed is only a technique to demonstrate the resilience of these characters and the love, they have for each other, outmaneuvering hate<sup>16</sup>. There is no erasure; on the contrary, there is radiant

<sup>16</sup> At the same time, by not centralizing violence, the film becomes a political narrative that destabilizes the normative gaze of films representing trans people. As per the films previously mentioned, trans films often

visibility as they are the center of attention, walking, running, stomping, creating visibility in this cultural text, leaving behind, with every movement they make, a trace of themselves. The energetic high beats-per-minute soundtrack also lends liveliness and dynamism to the imagery rendered as they present the Los Angeles they know first-hand to the viewer(s).

This film demonstrates how queer visibility matters. Alexandra and Sin-Dee are two queer people who are as visible as can be, making scenes, calling attention – only by being themselves- wearing their pride on their sleeve. This type of visibility MATTERS. Queers have taken multiple roads, sometimes winding, sometimes bumpy, nonetheless queers have survived and continue to survive. *Tangerine* demonstrates, through positive affectivity, how life can be tough yet there is much to love. The film continually places trans characters as having communities and friendships, they are not alone. Hence the difficult-*ties* of friendship. Despite the problems two people may have, the ties to friendship always triumph, friends love you for who you are. In *Tangerine*, friendships with cisgender women is a welcoming and pleasant surprise. *Tangerine*, in my reading, argues for a retheorizing of trans difference in film, by recognizing that representation of trans individuals and experiences too often presents a pre-constituted trope (body issues, sex work, death, violence). Instead, the film, in the inclusion of the actresses' experience and guidance, narrates a different perspective, one that fights against violence and negativity by showcasing the opposite: resilience, survival, positivity and love.

rely on tropes dealing with homo/heteronormative relationships, coming out and/or murder of the trans person.

*Tangerine* provides the viewer with an awareness of difference and resilience that can empower others, instead of marginalizing them. The immediacy and intimacy provided by the constant close ups and medium shots of the film provide a connection between Sin-Dee and Alexandra, allowing for their intersected humanity to thrive. This filmic representation of trans lives and experiences provides a script for a metaphorical interaction with trans lives so that those of us who have had little to no contact with trans\* individuals can gather a different perspective on trans experience. Since many films often take a negative affective approach to representation, those films can normalize, unintentionally, the suffering of trans individuals.

*Tangerine* offers the viewer a new way to engage and interact with trans experiences, centering their resilience, love, and friendship. The use of iPhones, and the particular technology paraphernalia, like the camera adapters and editing applications, allowed for a more intimate representation of private spheres, especially affective and emotionally charged spaces. Aided by the ubiquity of filming with iPhones, the film benefited and portrayed more intimate and ‘natural’ scenes that contrast with the limitations of traditional filming. This unique film, filled with unpredictable adventures, creates a relatable and charming tale of love and friendship that portrays solidarity among women. That, perhaps, is the most transgressive aspect of *Tangerine*- creating a narrative that focuses on positive affectivity in trans life. Since the film tackles the constant media narrative of, often US-based, representation of well-off white protagonists, *Tangerine* highlights diversity and the intersectionalities that both Alexandra and Sin-Dee represent in trans US filmic culture.

It is precisely this positive representation of trans-friends that foments social activism, in at least two different ways: resistance and (trans)sexuality. The first act represents resistance to normalization, even if it is at the local level, in the limited space of the streets. With the advent of both New Queer Cinema and technology advancements, films have been able to showcase and create visibility for/of subjects often omitted from the national body.

## Conclusion

This dissertation began by asking, how are the politics of an 'out' subject/cuerpa different from those passing as straight? What differences or politics affect the person when their gender performance is always read as queer? More importantly, what are these openly and visibly queer bodies doing to change queer politics both theoretically and in the streets? I have engaged with *Melodrama* by Luis Zapata to demonstrate the ways in which Zapata's oeuvre thematically and intertextually pays homage and subverts Mexico's Golden Age melodramas, a particular time period in Mexico's cinema, by inscribing a homosexual love affair and explicit sexuality into the heteronormative dominant idea of *family* in Mexican filmic melodramas. Ultimately, said chapter focused on the different ways in which *Melodrama* destabilizes notions of gender, the body and sexuality in both straight and non-straight. Additionally, there is an emphasis on the form of the work itself as it dialogues and accentuates the performativity of the reader/viewer with clever metastructures that leads to a positive representation of homosexuality - contrasting the strong literary and filmic tradition of representing *deviant* sexualities as tragic. This chapter in particular answered how the openly homosexual subjects found in *Melodrama* appropriated the coming out trope often found in queer melodramas. Inspired by the Mexican *Época de oro*, *Melodrama* appropriates the heteronormative relationships and reinscribes them with an openly homosexual love affair while also showcasing explicit homosexuality. A queer love that gets further explored in the Mariachi chapter.

In the “Sácala (del closet)” chapter, there is an emphasis on the ‘Melos’, the music, in melodrama. Utilizing space and queer theory, I demonstrate the form in which the transgressive performances and outspokenness of Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles appropriates the strongly gendered and sexualized nature of mariachi music, in the process producing queer desire and fantasy for/with the audience present. A key element for transgression is the Visibility and visibility (key differences further elaborated in the chapter) of the mariachi members who actively chose to voice their queerness, which I read as a form of activism for the betterment of the queer communities. The performances re-imagine what it means to be queer and what it means to unsettle patriarchal, heteronormative frameworks that are historically associated not only with Latino culture and Chicano activism but indeed socially pervasive across the different ethnic groups that make up the United States of America. This sense of ties to the communi-*ties* they belong, as latinx and queer, allows for queer worldmaking during their performances through affective positivity that imagines not only self-love but also inspires love for other queers. With the cultural ties to Mexican culture and mariachi music, this chapter allowed to move forward with a transborder approach to question notions of Mexican masculinity, as seen in mariachi culture, as well as a binational conversation on what it means to be queer and mariachi in the United States.

A connecting thread throughout the chapters is the recurring theme and manifestations of what I am calling *unapologetic raw queer sexualities* (as defined in the introduction chapter) found in Mexican melodrama (as genre and metastructure). *La casa*

*de las flores* takes inspiration in representing unabashed sexualities found in filmic and *telenovela* melodramas respectively. Considering *La casa de las flores* is inspired by melodramatic Mexican telenovelas the task that follows recapitulates the transgressive factors in contrast with the historic Mexican *telenovela*. As such, the Mexican telenovela can be considered a watershed factor that further provided opportunities for new formats to arise, eventually leading to the restructuring of televisive and filmic melodramas. As I demonstrated, the historic Mexican telenovela inspired transgressions (both thematic and structurally) in what is formally called the *Nueva Telenovela* in México and the different forms in which *La casa de las flores* reutilizes and destabilizes the structures found therein. Particularly for this chapter, the idea of failure, following José Esteban Muñoz' *Disidentification* and Jack Halberstam's *Queer art of failure*, I emphasize the different forms in which failure is resignified through melodrama in *La casa de las flores*. The cinematic codes normally used to explore sexuality in Mexican melodramas allowed for the displacement of heteronormative sexuality by appropriating said codes and explore the queer intimacy found in the unapologetic and raw queer sexualities in the show. Queerness that proved to be more effective at accepting different manifestations of heteronormative *failures* to thrive in the alternative world of *la casa chica*, a queer space of love, positive energy and acceptance.

With the film *Tangerine*, I spark a dialogue between the representation of the 'family' in queer (of color) films and *la familia* as presented in Latinx narratives to demonstrate the many mechanisms used to reform the ideas of family in kinship. Restrictive communities are reformulated in *Tangerine* since the hegemonic ideals of the

'family' are ruled by uneven power relations and too often gender/sexual difference is reason enough to expel the queer subject out of the 'biological family'. Yet, a silver lining flourishes in this original expulsion from the family nucleus since it allows for *the chosen family* to emerge. In the case of the film, the chosen family consists of two transgender women who redefine the notions of 'family': a revolutionary family structure in which the members, Sin-Dee and Alexandra, have equal power and thus pushes for *community* as replacement of the restrictive 'family' structure. In both queer and normative filmic representations of 'family' there is an unbalanced power relation epitomized in the parent-child relation. In the case of 'chosen family' in queer presentations, I emphasize the documentary *Paris is Burning* to demonstrate how the 'houses' and 'mother'- 'daughter' relationships therein are an appropriation of the normative family/home structure. The power imbalance in the relationship remains. In contrast, *Tangerine* thematically undoes the power relation and creates a more united family, community, where each member has equal power. All family members can and do contribute to the well-being of this particular trans community. With the visibly and openly queer bodies of Alexandra and Sin-Dee, this chapter not only questioned the normative family structure, but it also presented two "post identity" queer subjects (post coming out) who explore and question their queer sexuality but an exploration beyond coming to terms with their sexuality. Instead, it is an exploration of love and affection from two well-rounded queer subjects filled with energy and love as they explore the streets of Los Angeles with their infectious positivity and friendship.

In conclusion, this dissertation, inspired by the openly queer subjects of previous melodramatic Latin American works, defined and explored unapologetic and raw queer sexualities. In their positive affectivity, these subjects allowed to explore different themes that differ from the typical tropes of coming out, HIV (and its aftermath) or the violence that many queers face both in fictitious and real worlds. By referencing and taking inspiration from the genre of melodrama, particularly Mexican melodrama, the first chapter explored and queered the metastructure of heteronormative romance by replacing the common ‘happy ending’, or the ‘happily ever after’, with a queer love affair throughout *Melodrama*. In the “Sácala (del closet)” chapter, the Mariachi Arcoiris de Los Angeles focused on the melos, the sound, of melodrama in order to emphasize the political activism of *queering* the space with their performance, in the process creating a space and atmosphere for self-love and queer love to emerge in their *serenatas*. Following this positive portrayal of queer love, *La casa de las flores* deconstructed the technical codes of Mexican melodramas in order to have queer intimacy arise and displace heteronormativity. Lastly, *Tangerine* questioned the normative family structure and offered an alternative: a community, a friendship, with stronger ties and equal power relations while also showcasing a positive and affective *transsexuality*.

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