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# LESSONS FROM THE FATHER

**FIFTEEN YEARS AGO.** The *mercadito* in East L.A. There is a maze of shops and restaurants inside this former synagogue. A singer performs with a mariachi band for restaurant patrons. His voice is imposing and appealing: unrequited love, tears, and alcohol deluge his voice. He channels a championing misery, failure, and defeat (also perceived as emotional triumph and moral superiority) that the songs of lyricist José Alfredo Jiménez instilled into the popular imaginary of my father's generation. Many praise José Alfredo's genius; this performance confirms the complex authorship of his work. What I saw that night was the image of a nation, what I heard was the *dueño*, the "owner," ("whether you like it or not") of a disdainful woman.

I recoiled in my seat...

Now. At home, he finds the songs of that same masterful lyricist ("*quieras o no, yo soy tu dueño...*") in his daughter's voice. He is generously drunk and ripe for this song. These songs, with the signs of the *borracho*, *tequila*, *vino*, *cantina*, *cantinerero*, and so on, induce the performance of inebriation, of the sentimental man that is still macho (no, *what* induces the performance of inebriation, how does it develop a dependence to perform?). The singing drunk is interpolated. No longer a singer, but a writer, I listen in, from the kitchen's periphery, to this doubly drunken moment. The dependence of alcohol has not erased this refuge, this vocal cove of protection for him.

*Excuse me, I was just leaving, I don't want to bother anyone, but I heard you sing that song... that is a beautiful song, and I want to sing it with you... disculpame...*

<i>Quise allanar el olvido</i>	I wanted to forget
<i>Al estilo Jalisco</i>	Jalisco style,
<i>Pero aquellos mariachis, y</i>	But those mariachis and
<i>aquel tequila,</i>	those tequilas
<i>Me hicieron llorar</i>	Made me cry

—  
*This is pure passion...*

...

Why the simple answers?

...

Beneath these images that circulate political economies of affect, emotion, manhood, heartbreak, is the obscure romantization of drunken performances in Mexican popular culture. The presence of alcohol (literal or figurative) is, there, imperative to the successful *des-ahogo* of heartbreak. *Des-ahogo* is an ironic term,

literally “un-drowning,” precisely evocative of the very drowning in alcohol. This is a tracing of the body that performs the pleasurable *des-ahogos* sustained and enhanced by intoxication, but also a dis-ease in witnessing, analyzing and learning within this framework. How does the body develop a dependence to perform emotion in this way, what induces the performance of inebriation?

Alcoholism and analysis instill a similar vice for (re)interpretations of (re)orientations. They both entail a physical/textual trail of danger/violence. Thus, one can reify certain cultural practices while drinking, arguing, writing and erasing. This is where the singing drunk and the analytical writer meet, where they overlap. And I, the latter, coming from a genealogy of intoxication accompanied by song, ask myself the question again: why do you desire to drink when you sing these songs? Vice versa?

How does this alcoholism become attached to cultural phenomena and not merely a psychological/physical dependence? How is the *sentimiento* underlined with sound, with tears? I recoil in my seat—I was already uncomfortable with this witnessing, this participating, this gendered colonization.

The myth of the *charro*, that image of horsemanship and masculinity, informs my

hearing, as a woman, of my father’s song. The *charro* is the valiant image of law and (dis)order, often representative of Mexican national identity, erasing ethnic and class difference. Before the Mexican revolution, *charros* dominated the landscape of wealth in the country. Afterward, their material belongings were largely lost. Not so their semiotic power. Song was essential to maintaining this. *Charro* and popular song wedded in the 1930s, and film consummated their union and initiated a collective yearning among viewers and listeners. In addition to the associations with power and nation, romanticism thinly veiled with drunkenness became an additional layer of the *charro*, often a vocal one. The gendered colonization expires in the breath of his voice singing about her rejection, her absence, her faults. But with the most seductive voice. On stage, the fist was not needed as much as this voice.

As a listener, I am impelled to continue. As a woman, I continue to recoil in my seat. Memories of those singers fully attired in *charro* costume in films return. How they begin to confess their mishaps to the *cantinero* with a bottle in hand, and an endless request for more: *que me sirvan, de una vez, pa’ todo el ano* [might as well let them serve me [drinks] until the end of the

year]. The request is timeless, sentencing. The cantina metaphor is transplanted into any space. The scenario repeats (but also changes)...

Far from the production of such scenes, or perhaps closer to them than I’d like to imagine, that *charro* still arrives fifteen years later, clad in different, casual attire this time, ready to sing his confession, bottle in one hand, interpolated by song we had already begun. The scenario now has the backdrop of this Angelino metropolis with enough chimerical and literal cantinas, enough reasons where and why to drink.

In a historical stupor, he performs “Ella” but *ella* cannot recoil in her seat anymore. Instead, I find a space in the performance and affect it through the analysis of this writing, which will continue to spill across many, many pages, Jalisco style.

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