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Corporealities of Feeling:
Mexican *Sentimiento* and Gender Politics

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Culture and Performance

by

Lorena Alvarado

2012

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2012

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Corporealities of Feeling:

Mexican *Sentimiento* and Gender Politics

by

Lorena Alvarado

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2011

Professor Alicia Arrizón, co-chair

Professor Susan Leigh Foster, co-chair

This dissertation examines the cultural and political significance of *sentimiento*, the emotionally charged delivery of song in *ranchera* genre musical performance. Briefly stated, *sentimiento* entails a singer's fervent portrayal of emotions, including heartache, yearning, and hope, a skillfully achieved depiction that incites extraordinary communication between artist and audience. Adopting a feminist perspective, my work is attentive to the elements of nationalism, gender and sexuality connected to the performance of *sentimiento*, especially considering the genre's historic association with patriotism and hypermasculinity. I trace the logic that associates representations of feeling with nation-based pathology and feminine emotional excess and deposits this stigmatized surplus of affect onto the singing body, particularly that of the *mexicana* female singing body. In this context, *sentimiento* is represented in film, promotional material, and other mediating devices as a bodily inscription of personal and gendered tragedy,

as the manifestation of exotic suffering, or as an ancestral and racial condition of melancholy. I examine the work of three *ranchera* performers that corroborate these claims: Lucha Reyes (1906-1944), Chavela Vargas (1919) and Lila Downs (1964).

Yet, in contrast to the discourse that naturalizes their depiction of *ranchera* melodrama, I contend these performers present scenarios that demand alternative epistemologies of affect, Nation and gender. Drawing from Chicana feminisms and interdisciplinary performance studies, I demonstrate how *sentimiento* functions as a technology of transgressive sexuality and a commodity of transnational appeal through the singing *mexicana* body. In my effort to demonstrate the radical politics of Reyes, Vargas and Downs, I consider the physicality of their performances, namely how gestures, sequences, choreographies, mediating technologies and vocal techniques constitute legible and manipulable codes of self and nationhood. My attention to the material and corporeal procedures needed to evoke feeling refutes the prevailing discourse that associates *sentimiento* as reflecting a depoliticized and natural ethos. The production of *sentimiento* by these singers subvert the form and style of the *canción ranchera*, laboring within and against its commercial nationalistic legacy that broadens the signification of masculinities and femininities along Mexico/United States transnational routes. This manuscript thus attempts a novel approach to intertwined national and gender narratives through the poetics and politics of *ranchera* musical production and performance.

The dissertation of Lorena Alvarado is approved.

Lucy Burns

Dan Froot

Elisabeth LeGuin

Alicia Arrizón, Committee Co-Chair

Susan Leigh Foster, Committee Co-Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2012

a las mujeres

(antonia

gertrudis

elvira)

las que amanecian

rasguñando sus dedos en la pila

lavando ropa

a las que migraron al norte

y se cambiaron de nombre

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Si se calla el cantor, calla la vida
-Horacio Guarany

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A common route that I physically and emotionally travelled throughout my time at UCLA was that stretch that connects Westwood to Huntington Park, a space that messily links enclaves and congested intersections. In their mundaneness, the boulevards between the Westside and HP were nocturnal *compañeras* that taught me new roads and the ways to connect seemingly incompatible worlds.

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VITA

- 2003 Universidad Pontificia Católica de Chile, UCSC Education
Abroad Program
- 2004 B.A., Latin American and Latino Studies/
Modern Literature
University of California, Santa Cruz
Santa Cruz, CA
- 2007 Graduate Summer Research Mentorship
University of California, Los Angeles
- 2008 M.A., Culture and Performance
University of California, Los Angeles
Los Angeles, California

PUBLICATIONS AND PRESENTATIONS

- 2011 American Studies Association, Baltimore, Maryland.
“The Right Feelings: Empathy for the Migrant and Lila Downs’
music” October 20.
- 2011 Chew on This Lecture Series, World Arts and Cultures Department
“National Sentiment, Global Stage” April 26.
- 2010 Center for the Study of Women E-Newsletter. Special Edition
“Writing about Music”. April 2010. “Lessons from the Father”.
- 2010 UC International Performance and Culture Multi-Campus research
group Graduate Student Retreat, UC Santa Barbara, June 13-17,
2010.
- 2010 Fowler Museum, Brown Bag Roundtable Presentation. University
of California, Los Angeles. “Aflame: Paradox and Passion in
Liliana Felipe’s music”. March 31st.
- 2009 Performance Studies Graduate Student Conference, Northwestern
University, Chicago, Illinois.
“Breath and *Sentimiento* according to Chavela Vargas”. April 24-
26

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: Feminist Genealogies of *Sentimiento*

...*Lucha Reyes simbolizaba y personificaba a la mujer bravía y temperamental a la mexicana. La atormentada artista, capaz de manifestar con toda franqueza que al cantar la canción 'Rayando el sol' sentía 'ganas de echarse un trago porque un nudo se le formaba en la garganta', estaba destinada a personificar el mítico personaje femenino encargado de dar voz a la canción del género ranchero.*

[Lucha Reyes symbolized and personified the *bravía* temperamental woman, a la mexicana. The tormented artist, capable of manifesting with all frankness that while singing the song "Rayando el sol" she felt the desire to have a drink because a knot formed in her throat, was destined to personify the mythical feminine character responsible for giving voice to the *ranchero* song.]

Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la Música Popular Mexicana* (1989)

Si Chavela Vargas ha perdurado y tan admirablemente a lo largo de seis décadas de vida profesional es por ajustar sus poderes vocales con el estilo interpretativo, por la técnica singularísima de adentrarse en una canción, extraer de allí el júbilo y el dramatismo (lo mismo con frecuencia), y localizar la identidad personal y nacional en el entrecruce de la soledad y la multitud a las puertas del sentimiento.

[If Chavela Vargas has persisted, and admirably so, throughout six decades of professional life, it is due to her adjustment of her vocal powers with interpretive style, for her singular technique of setting foot inside a song, extracting from it the jubilee and the drama (often the same) and for localizing personal and national identity in the crossroads between solitude and the multitude to the doors of *sentimiento*.]

Carlos Monsiváis, *Cupaima* liner notes (2006)

My mom always told me: 'You must sing with sentimiento,' [Lila Downs] said -- sentiment, feeling, soul. All were in full force on Saturday night in Mexico City, as she ripped through cumbias, rancheras and boleros she's composed or reworked from classic Mexican sources, their lyrics invoking lost loves, legends, struggles to live.

Tim Weiner, *New York Times* (2001)

In each of the quotations above, *sentimiento*, as a metaphysical force or psychic event, is directly or indirectly referenced in discussions of three *ranchera* performers: Lucha Reyes (1906-1944), Chavela Vargas (b. 1919) and Lila Downs (b. 1968). In conjunction, these citations disclose ways of explicating or attributing *sentimiento*. I refer to *sentimiento* as the communication of presumably genuine, often exquisitely imperfect-sounding fervencies in the *ranchera* song. The samples above, whether jointly or separately, demonstrate a desire to

elucidate on alluring and difficult to classify expressivity. The individuals above struggle to describe the *no se que* or “it” factor in the voices of Reyes, Vargas or Downs in different ways. Moreno Rivas rationalizes artistry by way of tragedy. Monsiváis lauds the sincerity palpable in Vargas’ musical renditions and identifies her emotive prowess as a hinge between intimacy of expression and collective manifestation of (national) identity. Weiner officially confirms *sentimiento*’s power in the event of song as a commodity that transcends genres, or to translate this culture-specific word and the worlds it evokes to an unfamiliar audience. All establish the centrality of the body in the exhibition and reading of affective codes. In concert, the selected quotes also demonstrate the very contingency, heterogeneity, and ideological tension the term entails. Its currency throughout the second half of the 20th century, and even before, is also palpable. In this brief glimpse of enthusiastic qualifiers, *sentimiento*’s cultural value and volatility is clearly evident. The citations provide some insight into the semantic expansion of *sentimiento*; a noun, but also a verb, a disciplinary (“you must sing with *sentimiento*”) method that compels the desired effect of sincere emotion in performance.

Reyes, Vargas, and Downs are singers intensely identified in memory and/or public discourse as having and exuding deep-seated feeling. Moreover, the quotes all reference women performers and invite a consideration of the cultural and gender politics of emotional expressivity, specifically as embodied by the Mexicana singing body. For example, Moreno Rivas writes about Reyes by accentuating (as most writing on Reyes does) the leitmotif of suffering and disease. In describing a strong temperament, a bottle of liquor, and a grimace that betrays that “knot in the throat”, one can imagine a defiant yet defeated body. Reyes is recalcitrant because her hands firmly placed on her hips and her chin pointed upward recall the soldier’s habitus via the *soldadera*, the female soldier of the Mexican Revolution. Yet, Reyes is

defeated in theory and mainstream interpretation inasmuch as her skills are sensationally rationalized as the evidence of, and directly tied to, vices. The trace of an alcoholic diva overwhelms Moreno Rivas' sketch. She evaluates Reyes' performance as an emotional failure to control, a flawed but successful exhibition. Thus, Moreno Rivas's quote is a singular example of how a *ranchera* female performer's ability to evoke and indeed invent emotional worlds is relegated to manifestations of injury and deviance.

This dissertation explores how the struggle for meaning and representation of *sentimiento* and the Mexicana singing body is driven by a colonial imaginary that deposits feelings associated with de-privileged excess onto this gendered body. I trace how *sentimiento* is rationalized as a bodily inscription of personal and gendered tragedy, as the manifestation of exotic suffering, or as an ancestral and racial condition of melancholy. I track how the performance of emotive prowess acquires a sensationalist and/or virulent meaning that undermines the technique embedded in artistic (re)presentation. Nevertheless, I did not select Reyes, Vargas or Downs solely due to their presumed embodiment of expressivity as a logic of troubled interiority. They have also generated a set of aesthetics and techniques of the body that challenges the colonial imaginary in relation to the *ranchera* and *sentimiento*.

As I will elaborate further in this introduction, the abject notions wedded to Reyes, Vargas and Downs are related to exoticized narratives that undergird histories of the *ranchera*. The disparaging logics associated with these performers are connected to discursive undercurrents related to the fascination with the folk, and to anxieties with female vocality. The *ranchera* genre was largely affiliated with a tragic mestizo subjectivity before the 1920s.¹ The

¹ The music ensemble of the mariachi, which typically musicalizes the *ranchera*, is thus entangled in the history of the genre, including the rural, string mariachi's impression on many

“lettered” traveler or critic who documented the simple yet perplexing voice he heard in his explorations promulgated the myth that connected the music with a racial type. In the archive of scattered notations about mariachi, the *ranchera* or the *ranchero*, *sentimiento* was indirectly theorized as an esoteric, classed phenomenon. Both simple and perplexing, what unfamiliar listeners heard as an uncouth yet emotionally driven voice conveyed a fetishized notion of feeling and truth that they documented for posterity.

After the Mexican revolution, the *ranchera* became a performance associated with cultural nationalism and underwent a massive commercial transformation. It became widely disseminated through film and radio and was performed by the major idols of the epoch. Jorge Negrete, for example, embodied the music using the codes of hypermasculinity and excessive patriotism. The scholarly documentation of the genre and its commercialization in the early to mid 20th century jointly produced an archive that naturalized the choreographic, visual and vocal codes of nationalism and heteronormativity through the ciphers of the emotional.² In addition to

an intellectual as a representative of rural sentiment during the Porfiriato, the ensemble’s emergence as a symbol of cultural nationalism after the revolution, and its current association with *mexicanidad*. While I do attend to the mariachi during key passages, my focus remains how *sentimiento* is expressed in and theorized through the *ranchera*, which may or may not be played by a mariachi.

² Consider Monsiváis’ description of the dashing *ranchera* star Jorge Negrete, a singer I discuss in Chapter Two and a pioneer in the field that became representative of the genre and the of codes of gender and emotion: “his baritone voice, his horsemanship, his status as a graduate of the Military College, and his gallant looks unquestionably assured his act to be the prototype of the “*charro mexicano*” (2008, 205-206).

the myths propagated by scholarly knowledge and the massive dissemination of the moving image and sound, one must also take into account the centuries-old trepidation toward the female voice. The history of fascination with female vocality slips into the discourse of the *ranchera* as women singers increasingly become visible and audible within the genre.

The invocation of abject gender and pathological or racialized feeling does occur in the context of Reyes, Vargas and Downs' work. But, I also focus on how their deployment of *sentimiento* inspires a defiant vision of profound feminist affinity. Each performer disidentifies from the *ranchera*'s postrevolutionary legacy of conservative virility and docile femininity. Their transgression of genre and gender, of vocal and bodily codes produces an array of work that suggests how the musical representation of emotion may challenge idealized notions of Nation and gender. They carve out a position within a masculinized musical sphere and do so in ways that jeopardize the patriarchal dominion within the symbolic construct of the *ranchera*. They reveal *sentimiento*'s potential to hail marginalized subjectivities by disrupting the deceptively authentic bodies and scenarios from where "true" or "legitimate" expressivity presumably emanates. In many ways, these performers anticipate the performance work of many contemporary artists that wish to "de-mystify and de-aestheticize the female voice in order to show that women can possess more assertive and less predictable forms of vocality" (Dunn and Jones 4). My feminist interpretation of *sentimiento* contests the representational modes that dominate renditions of Reyes', Vargas' and Downs' work, even as these artists remain commercially marginal.

While there are several outstanding *ranchera* female singers, I choose Reyes, Vargas and Downs because of their contradictory status as *ranchera* performers: they occupy an interstitial space within the genre due to their musical and performative choices at the same time they are

often lauded as “representative” Mexicans. Lucha Reyes’ legendary status as the first female *ranchera* singer and the originator of the *bravío* style is, for any *ranchera* performer including to Vargas and Downs, a primary influence. And, I assert that the comments, reviews and studies that account for Reyes’ singing ability are in effect discussing *sentimiento* (even though they never mention the term) as the causal effect of personal peril. Furthermore, Reyes’ style generated one of the first traceable debates on *sentimiento* as pertains to a stereotype of Mexican femininity, *la mujer temperamental bravía*. The timbre of this *bravía* “temperamental” woman is paramount in this evaluation. Her voice’s sound coded historically defective resonance interpreted as a transparent barometer of deviance and pathology. Just as Reyes disrupted ideas of vocal discipline with her proposition of *bravío* method in the *ranchera*, Vargas also challenges the performative underpinnings of the genre, including the regulation of the expression of sexuality. And Downs, as a heir to the musical legacies of Reyes and Vargas, performs *sentimiento* in the 21st century as a transcultural phenomenon exposed to transnational publics. Thus, each singer shows the historical specificity of *sentimiento*, its modes of representation, and its potential to generate, or sabotage, a radical politics. My feminist examination of the cultural and gender politics of emotion in *ranchera* performance is thus inseparable from and entwined with debates concerning gender, sexuality, mestizaje, (trans)nationalism, and exoticism.

This introduction primarily queries three main areas. The first section explores the polysemous quality of the word “*sentimiento*” and establishes a working definition. I discuss the etymology of the word and how the *ranchera* has transformed the meaning of *sentimiento*. I scrutinize how elements required to produce the perception of feeling have obscured, enhanced or distorted these skills of performance. I relate my overview of the word and performance back

to the case studies I examine in an effort to emphasize the historicity of the term. I then shift to a discussion of the relationship between the *ranchera* and the motifs of emotion it has historically inspired before going into a discussion on how contemporary Chicana feminist thinking encourages a feminist theorization of *sentimiento*.

Sentimiento in the work of Reyes, Vargas and Downs: Definition and Context

What is *sentimiento*? The appellation “*sentimiento*” qualifies, in the highest degree, the unnamable force of feeling that emanates from a particular singer and is felicitously communicated to the audience. The term denotes effective affect: it moves one to tears, to attention, to vulnerability, to memory, to recognition of the self (no matter if to a collective or individual body). To praise a singer’s *sentimiento* is arguably the highest accolade a *ranchera* artist can receive. The singer is aware of the performativity *and* the sincerity that her act demands. She, alchemically, con-fuses both phenomena, “living what she sings”, as legendary Tejano singer Lydia Mendoza has noted (Nájera-Ramírez 188).

A touch of genuine feeling that triumphs over the tyranny of mere technique, *sentimiento* designates a prized emotional transparency. In its endless possibilities of sound, timbre, pitch, and/or volume, *sentimiento* provokes the listener into empathetic feeling and resuscitates the ability to believe in something real. The moving sonority incites an affective moment that may be imagined as sounds rising and enveloping the listener like smoke in its ecstatic toxicity; they rise in their reflection of another’s hope, or offer sonorous company to somebody’s dismay. This denotation is seemingly in opposition to, and in constant tension with, rehearsal, falsity, and the ego. Clearly, *sentimiento* entails an element of hope, of possibility, of utopia. These broad

strokes touch upon the fundamental work of *sentimiento*'s performance, yet a need to further establish its meaning persists. What is *it*, indeed?

In the quotations that open this chapter, there is no specific definition, save for the *New York Times* writer's elaboration: "sentiment, feeling, soul". This interpretation, though literally adequate and a point of departure, is not the working denotation for this dissertation. Providing as it does synonymous and problematic categories that it fails to unpack, the "sentiment, feeling, and soul" resolution summons a spiritual realm to which *sentimiento* is typically relegated. Moreover, the *New York Times* definition vaguely links this *ranchera* tradition of feeling to a number of musical traditions and concepts that privilege emotive magnetism over the technically impressive voice (e.g. *duende*) but do not develop a specific understanding in any context.³

To define *sentimiento* would be to do what others have attempted—that is, to secure to it a steadfast and convenient meaning, an operation that simplifies the matrix of power under which *sentimiento* is produced. I do not seek to establish a conclusive designation, however; emotion is represented and produced in distinct historical moments, and it evokes disparate ideologies, occurs in different stages, films, recordings, and captures different audiences. Each performer experiences a cultural and historical scenario where varying elements converge to create the effect of interiority, or disturb this very conception. What I do attempt to do is to provide critical delineation that I proceed to unpack and complicate: *sentimiento* as the manifestation of a genuine, often exquisitely imperfect-sounding fervency of the self and emotional conditions (*celos, angustia, despecho, etc*) disclosed in *ranchera* performance. In addition, I understand *sentimiento* an act of honesty that migrates between and among bodies and

³ *Sentimiento* is invoked in or conceptualized around musical experience in multiple genres throughout the Americas, including the Andean huayno.

media as a sincerity effect.⁴ I am particularly concerned with noting how an “authentic self” materializes through sound and musical codes that convey hypermasculinity, heteronormativity, and nationalism. *Sentimiento* as I utilize it here is formed and invested in the interstices between the *ranchera* and its documented or imagined histories (including the mariachi ensemble), epistemologies of the voice and the representation of these musical subjects in various media.

The broadness of its possible meanings demands I locate the word at the center of this investigation semantically, geographically and musically. The Royal Spanish Academy defines *sentimiento* in three major ways: the action or effect of feeling, an emotional state caused by strong impressions, and the state of suffering due to a painful, saddening event. In *ranchera* performance, *sentimiento* is most often associated with this latter meaning of heartache, which I discuss at length in Chapter Three. In addition, the word *sentimiento* derives from the Latin word *sentire*, a word that has ranged in meaning from physical feeling, opinion and emotion (Williams, *Keywords* 281). Moreover, *sensus* (from where the word *seso*, brain, derives) signifies sensation and also “common sense”. Etymologically, then, physical sensation and reasoning are embedded in *sentimiento*—I question how “physical sensation and reasoning” might apply in the context of performance, in particular the performance of the *ranchera*. As applied in the musical tradition of *ranchera*, what processes of logic or feeling does *sentimiento* denote? What nuances and re-significations does the (Latin-based) word acquire in a milieu of musical mestizaje? In particular, what kind of thinking/feeling does *sentimiento* suggest within the highly mediated and commercialized performance context of the 20th century *ranchera* to which Reyes, Vargas and Downs are subject?

⁴ I borrow this term from the introduction to the book *The Rhetoric of Sincerity* (2009), edited by Ernst van Alphen, Mieke Bal and Carel Smith.

To begin exploring this question, I contend that in addition to feeling, *sentimiento* in the *ranchera* context designates sincerity and truth that is expressed outwardly from a seemingly interior point. That is, emotive expressivity presupposes a confessional logic. Expectedly, this logic involves a particular way of moving the body, of training the voice, of communicating about feeling persuasively beyond logos —making feeling and its expression not an issue of spontaneity or interiority, but an aesthetic. What I am striving for here is to theorize *sentimiento* as a *performance* by a *ranchera* singer, an act best understood as a question of rhetoric, a deed that does not take feeling for granted, but rather manipulates the cultural codes of sincerity. However, attention is not only due to the body: technological mechanisms aid in propagating the fantasy of *sentimiento*'s origin in the body. *Sentimiento* is elusive in its production. As a product of a complex network of power and resistance, there is no formula to “achieve” *sentimiento* per se. The framework of performance I employ includes a complex matrix of 20th century technologies (production, mediation, and sequencing in sound recordings or film, for example). The audio-visual technologies, in addition to techniques of the body, enable the very existence and circulation of *sentimiento* as a (re)produced expressive tradition at a mass level. Performances that can be repeated over and over again, as Amanda Weidman (2006) has noted, are more likely to yield a product that listeners may deem as exceptional, representative and or unique, voices of *sentimiento*, so to speak. Attachments to a transcendental imaginary (*la verdad, Dios, el corazon*) develop from the context of mass culture and consumption in the 1930s and 40s when replication of performances became ubiquitous.

Once we consider the meaning of sincerity and the corporeal and technological modes of production that this performance entails, the question of its relationship to power arises. Who may qualify a performance as exhibiting “it”? If *sentimiento* is self-evident, to whom is it so?

Who holds the discursive power to extol a certain being with titles like “queen of *ranchera*”, as conveying the most “pure spirit of the Mexican people”, or conversely, as incapable of satisfying a similar image? What expectations are there for this representative? In pursuing these questions, I have a particular concern in mind: the gendered subjects that *sentimiento* and their representation. Performance of music, after all, is interlaced with presentations of identity and identification. If *sentimiento* is believed to come from deep inside the recesses of interiority, Western imagination reserves a specific spectrum of possibility of how a woman’s inside can be constituted. Are there distinct implications in the *sentimiento* according to gender? How is the capacity to “convey authentic feeling” itself conditioned by gendered intersections with race and class? Female performers labor under the gaze, and a particular pleasure is derived in listening to them, in making them the figure of the nation and thus grant them paternalistic permission to represent. How is *sentimiento*, then, conditioned upon specific expectations of the female body, or does this evocation of feeling seem to transcend difference?

I consider these queries by critically engaging with specific performances by Lucha Reyes, Chavela Vargas and Lila Downs and their reception that illuminate possible responses. I contend these singers constitute a historic and material continuum within the history of *sentimiento* performance not merely as a portrayal of emotion, but as an example of how affective codes are inscribed as advantage and impediment onto the female body in the *ranchera* tradition. The example of their labor facilitates an exploration of *sentimiento* as that double bind—privilege and burden. The artists I selected belong to a minoritized group in their respective temporal contexts, each performs the *ranchera* strongly reflecting her differentiations, and each opted not to capitulate to a homogenized vision of the *ranchera*. Moreover, their minor status in the genre typifies an anti-idol ideal (Jorge Negrete, Pedro Infante) not necessarily

entrenched in commercial goals of success. As diasporic subjects, Vargas and Downs additionally illuminate how *sentimiento* is a performance that acquires its meaning within globalized scenarios. As a result of this minoritized performativity, their *sentimiento* is one that counters the universalizing force of nation and the opprobrium of gender. The labor of each performer herein invoked echoes an effect contemplated by Alicia Arrizón: “While the dominant subject attempts to establish a homogenous cultural space through (an imposed) authority and (problematic) authenticity, the subordinate unsettles, shatters, and disrupts domination” (2). These performers, having failed to adapt to dominant, homogeneous patterns of the *ranchera* and/or gender at their particular historical moments, engaged or currently partake in the difficult task of proposing an alternative method to the oppressive parameters of cultural nationalism through music, conceptions of femininity and masculinity, and the emotional codes that conform the former and latter.

The order of their analysis here follows a chronology. However, this is not meant to be a linear history of *sentimiento* through their performances. Nor do I assume that an “evolving” mode of performance is evident through their example. I pay attention to both their representation and the need to delink their *sentimiento* from the colonized phenomenon it is made out to be, even if at times they are complicit in perpetuating the emotional fantasies of an exotic other. In foregrounding their techniques and choreographies, I highlight their theorization of feeling, one that expands the ontology of womanhood. At the same time, an analysis of their acts provides an alternate history of the *ranchera* as this genre evolves into a cultural phenomenon, product, and performance⁵. Yet, there are specific ways that each performer

⁵ A similar study, however, can be done analyzing the labor other singers in the genre: Matilde Sánchez, Irma Vila, Lola Beltrán, or Lucha Villa, to name but a few, were (and in the case of

demonstrates a distinct web of nuanced relationships between *sentimiento*, gender, sexuality, empathy, and/or exoticism.

In regards to Reyes, *sentimiento* is interpreted as noxious femininity, and I do a counter reading of her myth in order to bring to view her visionary method. Vargas comes of artistic age as *sentimiento* begins to express a masculinized lament. The music of Downs and its representation expose how *sentimiento* circulates between Mexico and the United States as a transnational cultural production and a transculturated performance. That is, *sentimiento*'s codes of effusive feeling are identified and racialized as Mexican, a legacy of song-making vocally attributed to Reyes and Vargas. As Downs' musical work is a vigorous experiment with various (Latin) American genres, acoustic and electronic instrumentation, *sentimiento* becomes an intertext that is not only performed but explained and revealed in the context of a musical product that often inevitably is consumed through the lens of exoticization. The publics that Downs hails include listeners both cognizant of and unfamiliar with the *ranchera*.

The ways *sentimiento* continues to be produced and framed in relation to Vargas is similarly related to the damning and alluring narrative of the temperamental woman. Yet, not only do Reyes and Vargas share a similar discourse. All three singers are thus part of the same

Villa, are) successful singers with legendary ability to evoke *sentimiento*. A number of notable studies on *ranchera* female performers, using cultural studies frameworks, exist. These works have greatly influenced this project, and I discuss them to varying degrees throughout the dissertation: Yolanda Broyles-González, Antonia García-Orozco, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, Cándida Jáquez, Anna María Fernández Poncela and the upcoming publication by Sergio De La Mora, tentatively titled *La Tequilera*.

spectrum of musical, sexual, technical transgression in the *ranchera*. In addition, the analysis of these three performers unfolds and reveals a politics of tribute that is possible to notice only through a retroactive gesture: Downs cites Vargas at the same time she does Reyes, they mirror and mimic one another as an act of admiration and triumph.

My dissertation gestures toward writing the genealogy, in the Foucauldian sense, of *sentimiento*; I do not wish to direct attention to *sentimiento*'s origin or a teleological dynamic it might obey. Rather I seek to “isolate the scenes through which [*sentimiento*] engage[s] in different ways” (Foucault 76), instead perhaps looking at how it has been assumed to have a history and origin. Moreover, a genealogical approach puts a particular focus on the role of “truth”. The songs of the *ranchera* are repositories of memory and repertoires that enable the expression of *la Verdad de Dios* (“*Que tristeza, verdad de Dios!*”), the truth that is attributed as much to the (singing and listening) self as to God. Genealogy encourages the complication of this “truth” so often paired with *sentimiento*, not as an essential interior manifestation.

There is clearly a geopolitical dimension to *sentimiento* and its use in discourse. The case studies presented by Reyes, Vargas and Downs demonstrate the distinct geopolitical terrains as well as the transnational, trans-temporal imaginary wherein *sentimiento* acquires, maintains or shifts meaning in this study. To sing “with *sentimiento*” in 1940s Mexico City does not yield the same effect, condition or expectation as *sentimiento* in the early 21st century New York or in internet reproductions, although fantasies or desires of the precise execution of it may persist across time. Moreover, these artists are all implicated with the migratory routes that inform their own performances, paths involving the borderlands between Mexico and the United States as well as within and beyond the hemisphere: New York, Madrid, Costa Rica, and South America. The various texts that form my archive and implicitly or explicitly construct *sentimiento* and

inform my theorization reflect the geopolitics and temporality of their enunciation. In formulating hypotheses of *sentimiento* within a feminist framework, I have utilized theoretical works informed by 20th century borderland studies, postcolonial theories, and Chicana feminism, pioneering studies that engage the intersectionality crucial to any critical evaluation of Mexicano/Latino/Chicano popular and transnational cultural practice similar to *sentimiento*.

Ranchera and Sentimiento

The topic of *sentimiento* must be broached by exploring its links to both *lo ranchero* and the *ranchera*. In this section I situate scholarship of the *ranchera* in order to discuss how late 19th and early 20th century intellectuals imagined *lo ranchero*, broadly defined, as a musically-inclined subjectivity. During the first half of this period, *ranchera* performance became a promulgator of Mexican nationalism and a cultural product with a high affinity with patriarchal modernity. Thus, this section gives a history of the production of *sentimiento* as it was invented through and for the *ranchera*. My purpose is to provide a background of the term *ranchero* and the music genre that will continue to be discussed, as necessary, in the subsequent chapters. One can identify *sentimiento* as what Raymond Williams might call a structure of feeling. This concept designates an experience concerned with:

meaning and values as they are actively lived and felt...a social experience that is still in process, often indeed not yet recognized as social but taken to be private, idiosyncratic, and even isolating, but which in analysis (though rarely otherwise) has its emerging connecting and dominant characteristics, indeed its specific hierarchies. These are often more recognizable at a later stage, when they have been (as often happens) formalized, classified and in many cases built into institutions and formations. (132)

Structures of feeling, then, are phenomena in process, and they often go unnamed as they develop into socially meaningful experiences that, due to their novelty, exist as “lived and felt”, but not formalized or recognized collectively. This is the case with *sentimiento* as illustrated in travel writing and or scholarship, a phenomenon felt and thought that generates a discourse that combines the fascination of a *je ne sais quoi* with attempts to situate it within the framework of a developing nationalism. Being *ranchero* is equal to sounding *ranchero*, genuine, authentic, and eventually, feeling Mexican.

Lo ranchero is a broad term that for the purposes of this study designates a rural, provincial, often idyllic and romanticized imaginary that emerges in post-revolutionary Mexico: *haciendas*, horses, and of course, the *ranchero*, the generic term for any man working in any capacity in the rural context. Before the post-revolutionary effervescence, *lo ranchero* was positively correlated with a prized raw sentiment expressed in song. Jesus Jauregui, writing about mariachi, notes how the archive from which he extracts observations about the mariachi prior to the 1920s is scarce, fragmentary and written by those outside the song practice (210). Jauregui’s fieldwork not only leads to opinions and evaluations about the mariachi by lettered travellers; several statements and impressions from the annals at the turn of the century highlight a certain emotive expressivity of the *ranchero*’s music and his voice. These ideas written by awestruck writers reach a highly racial tone into the 1920s.

Writers and intellectuals found in *lo ranchero* a repository of both inherent musical ability and the chronic affliction of melancholy affects. In the celebrated *Los Mexicanos Pintados por si Mismos* (1855), an illustrated volume of chronicles wherein writers explore one of several popular “types” (the seamstress, the postal worker, the midwife, etc), one of the featured profiles is the *ranchero*. Author Jose Maria Rivera writes about the *ranchero* ethnographically: Rivera, a

city dwelling writer, visits his employees' family in the outskirts of Mexico City. In the midnight journey guided by his worker's son, Rivera listens as his escort sings spontaneously. He is amazed by the purity of timbre that, to his ears, reflects an ancestral gift: “*mi guía...hizo vibrar en el silencio de la noche una voz sonora, robusta y un poco desafinada, pero llena de melancolía y con cierto aire de afectación que jamas abandona al rancho cuando canta*” [in the silence of the night, my guide sang with a sonorous, robust and slightly out of tune voice, but full of melancholy and with a certain air of affectation that never leaves the rancho when he sings] (191). Rivera’s description includes the features commonly attributed to voices of *sentimiento*, one of which is the desired flaw (which reflects self-taught singing, and often a classed condition). This prized imperfection obscures even the “silly” lyrics that the *rancho* sings, illustrating the contradiction between what is expressed in words and the emotional conditions being conveyed. Clearly, Rivera’s ethnographic exposition reflects the oft-rehearsed fascination with the “exotic” voice, the voice that due to the marginalized conditions under which it is produced, exudes special charm for the listener that takes joy in deciphering its codes.

Rivera’s literary example reflects a greater trend by scholars and intellectuals to classify and identify music as evoking a “Mexican spirit” that continues into the 20th century. As historian and popular culture theorist Ricardo Perez Montfort notes, the classic musicological studies on Mexican music that mushroomed during the second half of the century⁶ zealously attempted to showcase a particular “uniqueness” in popular music. According to Perez Montfort, these authors homogenized and exoticized an entire spectrum of popular music practice. Even if

⁶ See, for example, works by Rubén Campos, *El Folklore y la Música Mexicana* (1928), Higinio Vázquez Santa Ana, *Canciones, Cantares y Corridos Mexicanos* (1925) and Juan S. Garrido, *Historia de la Música Popular Mexicana* (1974).

they acknowledged the songs as products of specific authors from disparate class, racial or geographic backgrounds, scholars uncritically located the origin of the music in the soul of Mexican peoples (11). Perez Montfort recognizes how scholarship written at or about the time of the revolution glorified a myth of shared interiority of Mexicans. His observation enables my own argument about *sentimiento* as a fantasy and illusion that the urban lettered imagination attributes to peasant, rural and marginalized peoples.

Journals specializing in “Mexican” topics, including *Mexican Folkways*, published articles throughout the early 20th century that continued to confidently establish the link between *lo ranchero*, music and vocal grain. Moreover, the elites blazoned a cultural nationalism that located authenticity in *lo popular* or “the popular”. A curious example is the 1926 bilingual article “Ranchero’s Psychology”, where senator Manuel Hernandez Galvan typifies *ranchero* as a “social-psychological” term, formally utilizing it as an analytical category that echoes other racialized studies on “Mexican character”, including those by José Vasconcelos. In his anthropological analysis, Hernandez Galvan gives special attention to “the race” of the *ranchero* (either pure Indian or mestizo) and includes an assessment of his musical world (as the article excludes any mention of women or of gender). Hernandez Galvan notes that the *ranchero* “a product of ultra-sensitive aesthetic races—the Indian, plastic and melodious; the oriental Spaniard, dreamer and melodramatic and the Celtic Spaniard, mystical...is a born artist for poetry and music and the combination of both: song” (8).

The combination of fetishism for and erudition about the “native” mimics a global scholarship campaign that, in Mexico, endures in the modern and postmodern imaginary as the naturally sensible singing mestizo embodied in the *charro*. “Natural” and “innocent” feeling is

rather the expertise of the unrefined and racialized other, a breed of sentimental men.⁷ These documented vestiges of the *ranchero*'s gift for extraordinary musical ability and feeling, these observations on an innate attribute not acquired through formal training that fascinates the (lettered) listeners, are precedents of the (future) discourses on *sentimiento* as it is applied not only onto *ranchero* subjectivity, but to an additional layer of marginality: the female body. The world of *lo ranchero* becomes embodied in theater and eventually cinema through the glamorized, romanticized and domesticated *charro* that sings *rancheras*. At about the time Hernandez Galvan publishes his piece in 1926, the connection between *lo ranchero* and music acquires a new, lucrative dimension.

This affiliation of the *ranchera* with a glamourized *charro* imagery and its connection to civic and national pride arises after 1910 in Mexico City *teatro de revista* shows. In these “nationalist” theater shows, interludes (*bocadillos*) consisted of “a couple dancing the *jarabe* or a singer performing some *canciones*” (af Geijerstam 68). The *revistas* were satirical and comedic plays, highly popular with the poor urban class, which featured the emerging archetypes and gestures of *mexicanidad*: ways of speaking, landscapes, sayings, and songs (Carreño King 66). Among the various characters of the *revistas* was the *charro*. The *charro*'s image is first coupled with machismo and song in the vernacular space of the *revistas*. The *charro*, and his

⁷ Travel writer Jose G. Montes de Oca's notes are particularly illustrative: “*Ah, qué bueno es estar en Colima para saborear...la alegría desbordante o la tristeza honda que dan al alma los “mariachis” de los indios...los mariachis de Colima pueden considerarse con algo más representativa del alma aborigen en el folclore nacional...los nativos de corazón sencillo que aún conservan retazos de bellezas espirituales y espejismos de un arte melancólicamente dulce, carente de pompas culturales*”. (qtd. in Ochoa Serrano 119-120)

performance, personifies what the literary theorist Doris Sommer might call a “foundational fiction”⁸, a master metaphor necessary for national consolidation of Mexican identity. Thus, these theatrical presentations were part of a larger, capital-centric event, where musical and theatrical practices energetically alluded to nationalistic themes and served as entertainment and didactic devices for public consumption in the capital.

The nascent film industry, particularly the genre of *comedia ranchera*, was a crucial element in the development of the *canción ranchera* and the space where its masculinization was further consolidated to a mass extent. The cinematic *charro* appears as early as the 1920s in a silent film, *El Caporal* (1921). With the advent of sound, the voice and songs of the *charro* were enjoyed at a mass level. Popular culture and mass culture conflate at this historical period in the Americas and particularly in Mexico, facilitating the emergence and wide, mediated dissemination of the singing horseman figure. Nationalism here is synonymous with the application of certain cinematic formulas: *Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes!* is a clear, resounding example of the glamourization, glorification, domestication of a violently ambiguous icon, a benign movie idol whose gun evoked an authority that was also associated with the power of his voice. *Ranchera* song commercially emerges in Mexico City during the 1920s and 30s romantically evoking *lo ranchero* and the rural setting of peasant life. When official, patriotic agendas sought

⁸ This term is coined and theoretically developed by Sommer in her book *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America* (1993), a study of 19th century literatures from the Americas. In her examination of these texts, romantic love enables a dynamic, with race and gender at the core, that legitimizes the constitution of the ‘body politic’. Her concept insinuates a parallel with the sentiment I theorize here: ‘love and patriotism’ become entangled, a con-fusion the *charro cantor* achieves and sustains.

to promote cultural manifestations, the *ranchera* was a successfully publicized genre. Infused with an affective economy of nostalgia, *ranchera* lyrics were (and are) rich with the imagery of the *charro*, the hypermasculine horseman.

The commercial *canción ranchera*, by the 1940s uniformly musicalized by mariachis, promoted the *bravío* style: “aggressive, affirmative and vindictive”, words that suggest the “masculinization” of the *ranchera* as it became standard in *comedia rancheras*. Thus, *rancheras* with themes that affirmed nationalisms, localisms, and masculinities were commonplace, voguish interludes in *comedias rancheras* throughout the forties and into the fifties. A significant fraction of this repertoire consisted of those songs written from the masculine perspective (*La Cantante*, Jaquez 171): “Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes”, “Guadalajara”, “La Feria de las Flores” and other songs of regional or nationalist affirmation.

I wish to pay further heed to the aforementioned *bravío* style, particularly since Reyes is considered “the first” female interpreter of this style. *Bravío* is a style of singing of Mexican vernacular song that references its root word *bravo*, which signifies intensity and bravery, anger or volatility. It also evokes non-human behavior or phenomena: ferocious or untamed (animal), choppy or rough (ocean). *Bravío* becomes the descriptor applied to the commercial *ranchera* singers who employed an assertive and assured performance attitude. The reference to a wild dimension, to that un-tamely quality, is related to the rural milieu where the *ranchera* developed and its pastoral roots in a hierarchical hacienda society. Closely aligned with rancho imagery and lifestyle, it was also attached to the dominant prototype of that imagined space: the *charro*. Thus, to sing *bravío* was to sing “like a man”, using gestures and vocal tones associated with *charro* masculinity. Given these prevailing perceptions, gender ideology is very much embedded in *bravío* technique. To clarify, *bravío* is not synonymous with *sentimiento*; *bravío* is a specific

singing style, a particular way of conveying affect historically specific to the postrevolutionary period, and the postrevolutionary cause.

Men singing in the *bravío* style simply extended their expected masculine performance. In this understanding, *bravío* as an aggressive, affirmative and vindicatory style (Moreno Rivas) that, whether singing about romance or country, adopted a similarly boastful, demanding tone. *Bravío* here has more to do with the tone of the lyrics and grandiloquent attitude rather than a gravelly timbre. Several performers, including Negrete, were considered *bravío* singers even though they did not employ a severe method of song often associated with this style, the direct use of the throat. Such a technique is attributed to Lucha Reyes, whose unique trajectory as a singer (see Chapter Two) contributed to the development of singing *de garganta*, from the throat.

According to music historian Yolanda Moreno Rivas, this view of the *bravío* method does “away” with the voice itself, using the throat directly in order to achieve a hoarse, less musical effect (186). Moreno Rivas was providing a general interpretation although the male singers she cites sang using conventional techniques; thus, her explication adapts most appropriately to Reyes. This perspective on the *bravío*, the explicit reference to the body’s effort which implies the abuse of the vocal chords, is a definition that implicates corporeal infliction, a literal take on “bravo”. To sing *bravío* suggests an intensity and bravery that risks bodily trauma/drama. Although he never calls it by its name, music scholar Claes af Geijerstam refers to the *bravío* style when discussing a “Mexican style of singing”, in which women like Reyes sing “with masculine strength and authority” (125), further shedding light and revealing the profound performativity of the voice and the unconscious insistence on its “maleness”.

Bravío singing and method, in spite of or due to its association with hypermasculine myths, hence typifies gender elasticity and ambiguity exemplified in Reyes’ vocal tactics that

defied the expectations of femininity. As Moreno Rivas explicates, the former personification of the virtuous woman by *ranchero* singers, and their use of the voice, shifted in *bravío* performance to reflect a woman “experiencing terrible passions and disillusion worthy of any true city dweller” (191).

Essentialized as Mexican and naturalized as male, *bravío* nevertheless does imply a conscious method of undoing “proper” technique. In the voice of Reyes and of other *bravío* female performers, this style produces feminist performance, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Two. What is important to keep in mind now is how *bravío* is a rich site for not only for investigating constructions of gender in musical performance, but also for how *sentimiento* is produced within a gendered, highly contested matrix of representation via the body, particularly the voice. *Bravío* helps us understand one way in which *sentimiento* is constructed and expressed through performative means as well as providing insight into how its mediation perpetuates the myth of a timeless Mexican subjectivity. The performers that I highlight reference, in one way or another, this style of song; thus, the tracing of this method is a tracing of how the singing body adjusts to notions of *mexicanidad* that is masculine or to the bodily procedures that produce it.

Theorizing a Feminist *Sentimiento* in the *Ranchera*

The following section situates *sentimiento* as it has been explicitly referenced by discussions by Chicana feminists at the close of the 20th century. Clearly, their approach to the experience of frisson and representation of emotion through the *ranchera* departs significantly from the insinuations by scholars from the previous century. Emerging from a dynamic corpus of scholarly work on Latino popular music from at least the 1990s decade, the studies by Yolanda Broyles-González, Olga Nájera-Ramírez, and Cándida Jáquez explicitly discuss *sentimiento* in

the context of cultural studies interventions on the transnational cultural productions in the Americas and borderlands. Thus, this section provides a working “overview of the field” at the same time that I invoke these authors to situate my own approach to *sentimiento* as not a romantic repository of a vanished and/or imagined *ranchero* subjectivity, but as a performance of feminist practice and liberationist process.

From the field of Chicana/o/Latina/o Cultural studies, theater scholar Yolanda Broyles-González mentions *sentimiento* in her essay “Ranchera music(s) and Lydia Mendoza”, a study of borderland singer Lydia Mendoza and her legendary career as a beloved performer in the *norteño/ranchero* musical tradition. In this text, Broyles-González defines *sentimiento* in popular usage as “sentience and cognition (consciousness) as much as an emotional quality or sentimentality: a shared music [*ranchero/norteño*] in the Texas of the first half of the twentieth century implies a shared consciousness, instinctual awareness, and structure of feeling” (202). Grounding her interpretation of *sentimiento* in the specificities of Mendoza’s cultural and geographic milieu, Broyles-González expands the analytic and epistemological possibility of *sentimiento* beyond its “emotional quality” and relates it to issues of memory and class. I cite a key passage from the same text, a quotation that details related insights into the ways *sentimiento* can work that helps to contextualize my own approach, understanding and incursion into its performance:

Whatever instrumental ensemble she performed with, she articulated a *sentimiento* that resonated deeply within the realms of *raza* working class experiences across geographies...within her circle of song performance, her musical arrangements and her timbre, voice, body and spirit enacted the space of a popular collective expression. The expressiveness of her voice encodes a socio-cultural matrix far

beyond the surface value of the notes: her voice generates a spirit. If audiences feel, think and identify with the expressivity of her music it is because her music—her voice and repertoire—evokes the deep-rootedness of the people. (2001: 195)

Firstly, Broyles-González identifies that *sentimiento* is always already a product of its time and space, its means of production and its conditions of reception, and as such, a responsible (in both senses of the word) reading of its effects must consider these elements. The author defines *sentimiento* as a classed set of musical codes of emotion embedded in the complex “socio-cultural matrix” of the subaltern borderlands, thus politicizing its performance as a technology of identification and history making. The eloquent evocation of *sentimiento* circulates and is validated within a particular political economy. As a ‘structure of feeling’, *sentimiento* is a historical product, a materialist and corporeal element of performance. Expression, emotion, consumption and identification coincide in the affirmation or contestation of a given subjectivity.

Complementing this reading of the “encoding” of the “socio-cultural matrix far beyond the surface value of the notes” is the work of anthropologist Nájera-Ramírez and music scholar Cándida Jáquez. Drawing from, among other methods, performance studies in her feminist analysis, Nájera-Ramírez further attends to the aesthetics of emotional excess as reproduced by female *ranchera* singers. Scrutinizing singing style, costume choices, and sites of performance, the author demonstrates how the musical expression of the genre provokes a site that “expands the idea of what constitutes womanhood” (200). Moreover, the representation of an emotional spectrum that includes masculine-identified resonances generated an interval where the female *ranchera* singer could “express that which is otherwise unspeakable” (199). This is precisely when *sentimiento* becomes a communicative device and not a performance of ineffable quality. *Sentimiento*, as Nájera-Ramírez suggests, is a web of productive feeling that resonates within and

also beyond the representation of emotion in the singer, into the realm of identification and the possibility of a change in collective consciousness.

In addition to theorizing *sentimiento* as a performance in/of embodiment, cultural critics also consider, implicitly or explicitly, its repercussions on memory. As musician and scholar Cándida Jáquez has noted, *sentimiento*, which she describes as the dynamic summoning of a historical past, makes a performance significant and treasured by the listeners (172). Jacques clearly engages a tactical understanding of *sentimiento* as eliciting history, an interpretation that resonates with scholarship on memory and its role in the constitution of performance. For instance, theater scholar Deborah Paredez observes that “...the magic of performance resides in its ability to encourage transcendence beyond discrete temporal boundaries. While performance only ever occurs in the present, it simultaneously lifts us out of this present, haunted by ghosts of the past (invoking previous iterations of a role or a song) and gesturing toward future possibilities (creating structures of feeling or imaginative worlds)” (33). The ghostly dimensions of material consequence created in song likewise echo the generation of “spirit” in song by Mendoza (Broyles-González). Thus, the scholarly work of Nájera-Ramírez, Broyles-González and Jáquez all insist on performance as an act of memory and an “act of transfer” as Diana Taylor might identify it, constituting a set of repertoires. As I wish to develop such a generation of spirit, memory and consciousness, such an ‘act of transfer’ also can enact the decolonial imaginary. Moreover, the above inquiries into the performance of a subject of *sentimiento* further demonstrate the promise that a productive dialogue between the fields of performance studies and Latino studies can aid in elucidating what *sentimiento* does and how it achieves its effects.

This process of analysis provokes a distinct way of listening, recognizing and theorizing *sentimiento*, attentive to the deliberate desires encoded in the body and voice. This interpretation

informs the attentiveness with which I write about the body and how it signifies *sentimiento*, and even as Mendoza's voice "generates a spirit", a fortuitous sensation and hopeful evocation difficult to measure, Broyles-González does not overlook the importance of the bodily apparatus in achieving said "spirit", and further identifies it as an aesthetic. *Sentimiento* is produced as a bodily inscription that the performer shares with the audience, what I call the 'dialectic of feeling'. While these scholars do not engage in an explicit inquiry into *sentimiento*, their study is a crucial step in the exploration of its meaningful engagement in feminist inquiry, Latino/American and performance studies. This dissertation is also based on the work of three different singers, and the argument revolves not on historicizing their trajectories, but rather critically analyzing their work.

Methodologies

In order to develop my argument of the musical constructions of emotion, nation gender as they coalesce in musical performance, I have examined a wide range of archives: feature films and concert footage, music records and liner notes, photographs, song lyrics, and newspaper archives. I employ postcolonial and feminist readings on annals that document and convey various epistemologies of voice, body and gender in Mexican song. Media sharing websites and technologies, such as youtube.com, house a multitude of pertinent videos for this dissertation, concert footage as well as interviews and documentaries. The fact that these sources constitute a highly mediated archive significantly affects the development of my argument. My analysis is further informed by performance theories, including those that consider the corporeal and the vocal, feminist film theory, Chicana feminisms and musicological frameworks.

The singing *ranchera* body accrues social and gendered meaning that becomes legible through (visual) spectacle, be it through video, photographs, or live. Feature film is one archive I examine: in *comedias rancheras*, during musical scenes, actors engage a particular movement vocabulary and a sequencing of this vocabulary within the scenario of *lo ranchero*. Here, I employ choreography as a method to determine how the relationality of movements in a given performance produce subjects, an analytic rubric advanced by dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster. Choreography encompasses corporeal as well as verbal articulateness, focus on the unspoken, on the bodily gestures and movements that, along with speech, construct gendered identity. In so doing, I also take note of performance elements in a given work, such as sartorial choices. Why does it matter, for instance, that Vargas adopts the *jorongo* in her performances? What imaginaries is she invoking in such a choice? By hailing the *campesino*, Vargas engages in a transgressive practice of memory and an assertion of *marimacha* (Mexican lesbian butch) identity. I deploy this attention to the performative when discussing images and photographs, particularly album cover art and concert documentation, images that are carefully manipulated to transmit a particular sentiment through the arrangement of a scenario.

In noting the singing voice in film itself, I employ vocal analysis as applied within feminist film theory. In theorizing female vocality in earlier Hollywood productions, scholars such as Kaja Silverman demonstrate how film represents the female voice in a subjugating manner, reducing it to babbling curios, a thrilling, inarticulate object suitably embodied within a mysterious and fearful anatomy. The singing voice is a central concern in my study. I scrutinize literary (textual archives) and musical representations (sound recordings) of the *ranchera* voice. The textual archives conform chronicles about the voice that insists on the exotic essences of both the mestizo “race” and the feminine. These collections, mostly ethnographic reviews,

include early and mid 20th century descriptions of the *voz ranchera*. The authors of these accounts endow the *ranchera* voice with qualities of extraordinary, timeless sentience, a description that premeditates the foregrounding of the *ranchera* to the realm of nationally representative expressions. A decolonial analysis of these chronicles lays the foundation to historicize the proclivity to define *sentimiento* as a folkloric curiosity and to bear upon the fascination with the voice of the other---to conceptualize “expressivity” as a function of otherness. In addition, I draw from scholarship that acknowledges how the female voice and its representation functions in the western imagination “as a signifier of sexual otherness and a source of sexual power, an object at once of desire and fear” (Dunn and Jones, 3). The racializing of the other’s voice and gendering of vocal expression are connected by the enterprise of colonization.

In noting how writers attempt to explain the voice and not the lyrics, I tackle the *vocality* of a given performance (or textual documentation of a performance), a term that circulates in musicological and feminist studies of the voice. Vocality, coined by medievalist Paul Zumthor⁹, refers to the spectrum of signification beyond that established by language—including growls, pitch, volume, pauses, tempo, and how these manifestations are invested with social meaning. Such attention to the “vocal grain” is acknowledged in the analysis of Chicana/o cultural production, as Broyles Gonzalez has noted (“The expressiveness of her voice encodes a socio-

⁹ Paul Zumthor (1915-1955) was a literary historian and linguist whose research focused on medieval French poetry. In contrast to the prevailing tendency within literary studies during the 1980s, he directed critical attention to the voice in the study of medieval verbal art and theorizing the difference between orality and vocality, the latter describing both the physical manifestation of the voice in the construction of meaning.

cultural matrix far beyond the surface value of the notes”). I do not seek to proclaim vocality and *sentimiento* synonymous. Rather, the former encourages a methodology into *sentimiento*’s sonorous complexities. The expression of *sentimiento* constitutes the non-verbal textured evocations of denial, of disillusionment, of hope, of desire. These feelings and aspirations, moreover, crisscross the grid of expected or unsanctioned social and gendered identities.

In writing about this voice and its volatile significations, I establish a link between the physical sound, the emotional state it evokes, and the meaning behind artists’ choices to sing in a particular manner. Reyes’ forceful vocals, the grinding finish of her method (her vocality of abrupt *gritos*, for example) did not correspond to the expected sound emanating from her anatomical configuration; her voice was still rationalized as a result of “neurosis” in an effort to make sense of her *bravía* voice. As Dunn and Jones proclaim, this is a pattern pervasive throughout classical as well as popular music: “The anchoring of the female voice in the female body confers upon it all the conventional associations of femininity with nature and matter, with emotion and irrationality...such associations further point to the identification of woman’s vocality with her sexuality” (Dunn and Jones, 3). Reyes’ example demonstrates how attention to vocality, and its sequencing of pitches, tempos, etc., in any given performance, sheds light on the politics of gender in the performance of *sentimiento*. The expression of genuine feeling from an “authentic self” is more often than not an expression from the “accepted, expected self” within a given society (securing the female as well as male body within a limited ontology). Moreover, a critical examination of the acoustic and expressive qualities of Reyes, Vargas and Downs allows me to assert claims about how these women intervene within *ranchera* expressive tradition and consequently reinforce or contest female, ethnic, or national subjectivity.

The references to (and struggles with textually documenting) vocality are of course not limited to scholarly or early 20th century texts; I continue this archival approach to voice in contemporary journalistic accounts, particularly interviews, where the tension between performance and genuine selfhood is noticeable. Often, a failure to consider how the voice works or sounds like underlies the tendency to render the performance as unrepeatable and ineffable. Articles like *Hispanic* magazine's "Sweet Sorrow" on Downs' *La Cantina* album underscore the performativity of *ranchera* and reify its status as a repository of deeply felt Mexican emotion, a genre to be reckoned with only when the singer is emotionally prepared. How do contemporary newspaper articles and other sources from public discourse naturalize, or demystify, the vocal skill of these performers? What is the logic of *sentimiento* according to these accounts? That is, the auditory reception of Downs (for example) by different media outlets reveals an attention to vocality and an interest in designing a life narrative that "reflects" or explains the singer's particular style.

Taking into account the contentions made by theorists that relate gender as "performance", music scholar Suzanne Cusick (1999) has employed a method especially useful to my work and my argument that the *ranchera* is a creative endeavor where the contestation of gender is vividly enacted. In her essay, Cusick explores how vocal parameters signify notions of masculinity and femininity in popular music, namely in the work of bands Pearl Jam and the Indigo Girls. Borrowing from Butler, Cusick demonstrates how these artists exemplify gendered vocality at the timbral level. Lead singer Eddie Vedder's vocals, for example, construct a unified and expected masculinity by cultivating a "roughness" in the voice and refuting the codes of a "cultured" smoothness. The idea of *sentimiento* and of exuding it similarly originates from the fantasy that seeks to attach the singing voice with an essence coming from deep inside the body,

an essence that is unalterable and presumably expressive of a truth. While speech “requires that the mouth shape the stream of sound into language”, song demands a discipline that reaches into the inside of the “body’s borders”: “the act of singing a song is always an act that replicates acceptance of parameters that are intelligible to one’s cohort in a culture...it physically re-enacts, deep in the throat, the transaction that Eurocentric development theory asserts as the one that creates gendered subjectivity.” Using Cusick’s musicological approach, I take note of traditional or “standard” vocal procedures undertaken in the making of *ranchera* performance at a given time. I ask, how might Reyes, for instance, exert sonic control to produce a particular pitch, register, volume or even timbre? How do these technical choices cohere to yield a rendition of female subjectivity at odds with prevailing notions of femininity in post revolutionary *ranchera*? How does her musical performance of the *mujer temperamental bravia* become coded as such? What amounts to “temperamental” sonically in a woman, and what emotions are conflated and coded onto this qualifier?

The examination of lyrics complements the timbral analysis I undertake. *Ranchera* song is a textual repository of memory and identity—its content should not be wholly overlooked in favor of non-textual elements. Although my study does not primarily rely on the textuality of the songs, the repertoire of choice by the performers featured in this dissertation is significant; these *rancheras* construct clear prototypes of gender and actively hail pride in the Nation. Significant studies of lyrics of popular music apply textual analysis to advance a feminist argument, and one in particular, Anna María Fernández Poncela’s *Pero vas a estar muy triste, y así te vas a quedar: Construcciones de género en la canción popular mexicana* [You will be quite sad, and that’s how you’ll remain: the construction of gender in Mexican popular song] (2002) examines various Mexican musical genres and the imaginaries of femininity engendered in their writing.

My own study complements a textual approach like Poncela's by examining how the techniques that transmit emotion subvert or accentuate content. What other knowledge, beside that contained in the words, is being transmitted through the singing body. What are the vocal and gestural methods that accompany the narrative of the *ranchera*?

The Chapters

As my epistemological exploration of *sentimiento* is indelibly linked to the representation of the singing (*ranchera*) female body, Chapter One, "Alternative Artistry", attempts to trace the discursive field that produces and imprints the historical body of Reyes as the first female *ranchera* singer. This chapter contends that *sentimiento* is not the product of exteriorized torment, but rather the manifestation of a decolonial singing methodology. The thin archive of scholarly or popular writing on Reyes is largely posthumous and seems an anachronistic, nostalgic echo of a lost voice. These writings reflect a politics that conform to a genealogy of writing about the female voice in the western imagination. Thus, I connect this historiographical writing on Reyes to previous efforts (in this case, inheritor of fearful attitudes toward the feminine) that subjugate systems of knowing and pleasure in order to sustain a patriarchal order.

Sentimiento's gender politics are vividly enacted in the portrayal of the pioneering Lucha Reyes in Golden Age Mexican film. Her *bravío* technique, for instance, is a method for the making of *sentimiento* and a tool of decolonial pleasure, evident especially in her cinematic appearances. Like her voice in the text of the above writers, however, the potential of her creative agency is limited by the diegesis in an industry that sought to consolidate national identity through the cinematic construction of *charro* patriarchal subjectivity. The singing voices in these films were crucially attuned to desired models of femininity and masculinity. These

films domesticated Reyes' *bravío* and powerful stage presence, which occupied the symbolic terrain of masculinity, through the visual manipulation of her dissonance as marginal entertainment. To demonstrate this, I connect sets of distinct theories of representation: feminist cinema studies, theories of the voice and postmodern theory via Chicana/o studies. The fundamental model of *sentimiento* that Reyes invented and exuded, including its vocal and gendered transgressions, became a paradigm of *ranchera* performance.

The notion of *sentimiento* gains further capital as the *ranchera* develops into an established genre. I continue to track down the discursive construction of and fascination with *sentimiento* in relation to two singers influenced by Reyes: Chavela Vargas and Lila Downs. Vargas' performance of female masculinity, to use Judith Halberstam's phrase, also transformed the *bravío* vocal method with a repertoire that included songs that reflected shifting notions on masculinity dominated by motifs of fatalism, alcoholism and the display of anguished personal, rather than nationally celebratory, pride. Chapter three, "Transnational Laments and the Queering of *Sentimiento*" further inquires into the queering of the *ranchera* through a different manifestation of female abjection that is simultaneously celebrated and shunned. Even as Vargas disturbs the orthodox gender model typically reproduced in the *ranchera*, she additionally represents exoticized Mexican emotive qualities. In the context of this dissertation, this chapter attempts to bridge the discursive dilemmas on the female voice introduced in chapter one with concerns of the *mexicana ranchera* emotivity and its transnational representation.

The question of transnational publics continues to be explored with the case study of Lila Downs, who Vargas claims as her "heir". A versatile and highly successful "world music" singer, Downs' cultural production is strongly rooted in Mexican and Latin American musical practice, but she claims the *ranchera*, particularly its celebrated lineage of female artists

beginning with Reyes, as her primary influence. Due to a number of crucial factors, including the full support of a recording label based in New York, Downs, a bi-national citizen, has greater mobility than Reyes and Vargas did. Downs is especially accessible to media outside Mexico and the larger Spanish-speaking world and exerts a greater agency in articulating her artistic vision. She explicitly addresses *sentimiento*, and as an artist whose music circulates in the routes of global music novelties, her discussion of its performance adopts a didactic, explanatory tone, one aligned with fostering empathy for the migrant. In the process of elucidating its significance, Downs evokes the tropes of intrinsic melancholy and *mexicanidad*. Thus, her production and vision regenerate a heritage fantasy at the same time it theorizes what Patricia Zavella calls transnational collective memory (223).

I pursue *sentimiento* and its discourse in ways that acknowledge both the performativity of culture and the politics of emotion. In giving the term a history traceable in particular through a transnational *mexicana* vocal performance tradition, I argue that the undoubtedly spellbinding voices that give meaning to the intimate also achieve a concrete political purpose. The methodological emphasis on largely 20th century case studies suggests the specificity of its geopolitical terrain. Conversely, *sentimiento*'s resonance with discursive genealogies of the voice and its emotional and intellectual impact in the imagination across various temporal and geographic terrains indicates its interrelation to performance practices and the undeniable infrastructures of identification that sustain it.

CHAPTER TWO

ALTERNATIVE ARTISTRY: Decolonial Resonance in Lucha Reyes' *Ranchera Bravía*

Pronto Lucha Reyes simbolizaba y personificaba a la mujer bravía y temperamental a la mexicana. La atormentada artista, capaz de manifestar con toda franqueza que al cantar la canción "Rayando el sol" sentía 'ganas de echarse un trago porque un nudo se formaba en la garganta', estaba destinada a personificar el mítico personaje femenino encargado de dar voz a la canción del género ranchero.

[Lucha Reyes symbolized and personified the *bravía* temperamental woman, a la mexicana. The tormented artist, capable of manifesting with all frankness that while singing the song "Rayando el sol" she felt the desire to have a drink because a knot formed in her throat, was destined to personify the mythical feminine character responsible for giving voice to the *ranchero* song. (my translation)]

Yolanda Moreno Rivas, *Historia de la Música Popular Mexicana* (1989)

The reader of the above text may surmise a good deal of information regarding the emblematic Reyes (1906-1944), *reina de los mariachis*: She lived a "tormented" life and exuded a particular sincerity in her performances. By 1979, the year Moreno Rivas publishes her *History of Mexican Popular Music*, Reyes had become an icon of *mexicanidad*. However, her unorthodox technique was documented as the result of unfortunate personal events. In Moreno Rivas' text, Reyes transforms into a tragic woman that, in the world of *ranchera* performance dominated by *charros cantores*, stands defiantly and sings with her hands as much as with her voice, moving both in ways that trespass the usual terrain of "feminine" expression. Reyes' voice, according to Moreno Rivas as well as several other reviewers I will subsequently discuss, conveys nationalistic fervor tainted by personal choler.

Several writers insist on relegating Lucha Reyes vocal prowess to macabre factors, including accidents and alcohol, and thus deposit onto her body a lack of will, authority and history. In addition, the cinematic portrayal of Reyes in films as an incidental entertainer in bars or other masculinized spaces mimics the discursive production of Reye's voice. The films in

which Reyes participated frame her voice as emanating from a “fierce” female entertainer, her raging timbre positively correlated with the perilous surroundings where she labors within the diegetic text. In this chapter, in order to argue that Lucha Reyes’ expressive prowess is not the inadvertent result of psychosis, but a technique of decolonial characteristics, I engage the cinematic texts that frame her image and consequently her *bravío* voice.

First, I overview Reyes’ biography to provide the necessary background as well as to achieve a foreshadowing effect on the complications that arise in the analysis of her voice and her *sentimiento*. Secondly, I engage in a discursive analysis of her voice, noting how three major motifs predominate in the scarce scholarship on Reyes. These patterns suggest Reyes was a singer of extraordinarily evocative power due to her “personal torment”, locating the origin of her performative ability within the psychogenic and more generally equating it with a distraught, feminized, de-privileged interiority. Then, utilizing feminist film and deconstruction theory as informed by psychoanalysis and Chicana cultural studies frameworks, I examine how Reyes is framed as a diegetic performer in Mexican golden age film.¹⁰ I include the films *La Tierra del*

¹⁰ By identifying Reyes as a performer within the diegesis, I mean to note how the participation of Reyes is held insistently to the interior of the narrative. This position of ‘interiority’ is a disadvantaged one according to a psychoanalytic lens, for it impedes the capacity to project authority or the prerogatives of speech, vision, etc. The ability of communication and authority are gendered: male-identified and closely associated with the mode of filmic production. The female body and voice on the classic screen is the site of discursive lack. One way to equate women and the female voice with interiority, as Silverman argues, is to enclose the female voice “into what is overtly indicated as an inner textual space, such as a painting, a song-and-dance performance, or a film-within-a-film...male subjectivity is then defined in relation to that

Mariachi (Raul de Anda, 1938), and, to a greater extent, *Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes* (Joselito Rodríguez, 1941), in this study. In this latter cinematic production, Reyes' method hints at the development of a way of feeling and performing *mexicanidad* that de-centers the *charro cantor* performed by singer/actor Jorge Negrete. I engage in a third space feminist reading, following Emma Pérez' paradigm, of Reyes in order to demonstrate how Reyes' *bravío* technique, style and performance amount to a manifestation of judgment and agency. Reyes' display of *sentimiento* is, contrary to previously reviewed historical texts, not a product of the colonial imaginary, but a spectacle of decolonial desire, even within the cinematic text that traditionally sequesters the feminine.

A sinner's hagiography

Lucha Reyes (María de la Luz Flores Aceves, 1906-1944) is considered the first "queen" of the *ranchera*, acknowledged in contemporary studies as the originator of a genre and of a singing style, the *bravío*. The historiography of her career, however, weds her artistic achievements with her personal tribulations and relationships. The undeniable and electrifying *sentimiento* she exhibited is rendered the result of a mutilation of her voice caused by personal

seemingly transcendental auditory position, and so aligned with the apparatus" (56). That is, the female voice is not associated with authority or with discursive origin. The classic filmic apparatus, as pointed out by feminist film critics such as Silverman and as I will discuss later in this chapter, divides fiction from enunciation, what we see from how it is produced, according to a gendered regime: male subjectivity is assigned an extradiegetic position that identifies him with the qualities of the "absent one", classic cinema's enunciating agency with transcendental vision, hearing and speech.

distress. As with several other celebrated and idolized *ranchera* talents, Reyes' brief biographical narrative is framed with stories about the agonies of poverty, the abusive maternal figure, childlessness, and romantic failures¹¹. Her alleged "failures" in "womanhood" obstructed serious attention to her transgressive vocal aesthetic, her daring "appropriation" of the masculinized *ranchera* genre and her reformation of the *bravío* technique.

Reyes' trajectory as a performer was marked by obstacles but enriched by its unusual trans-nationality and the transcultural characteristic of her repertory. From a single parent household, daughter of a former *soldadera* (female soldier of the revolution), as a child Reyes was active in the itinerant street theater ensembles and *revistas* that formed in sectors of Mexico City. In her early teens, she earned a scholarship to study voice in Los Angeles, California, where she acquired her operatic technique. There, her performances of zarzuelas and operettas earned her acclaim from the Mexican American community. Upon her return to Mexico, Reyes joined a musical ensemble with which she toured Germany. It was a failed effort: the manager abandoned the company she traveled with, leaving her to her luck in a continent overwhelmed by World War I and a bitter winter. Reyes experienced respiratory problems and throat infections due to a bitter winter and, no doubt, the lack of planning of the tour's management (Garcia-Orozco 119). Reyes contracted laryngitis and eventually, developed aphonia. After a year, she returned to her country with a recovered voice and a distinct timbre. No longer a soprano, she

¹¹ In her polemical performances, Reyes foregrounded and "stylized" the gestures attributed to *soldadera* female revolutionary soldiers, a community to which her mother belonged. The scandals her singing style provoked were thus linked to Reyes' visible allegiance to her background. I discuss this point further later in this chapter.

became a contralto, the lowest voice for a female singer. Despite the significant physical change, her choice to change genres and develop a repertoire based on the emerging popular *rancheras* of the time was an auspicious one. Her singing of *rancheras* such as *Ay Jalisco no te Rajes!* [Jalisco, don't back down], *Sufrimiento* [Suffering], *La Vaca Pinta* [The Dotted Cow] represent what many consider the “first” rendition of these novel musical texts performed by a woman.

Reyes' successful incursion into both a popular form of entertainment and her reinvention of her vocal capacity are subjects of attention, but easily obscured by morbid attention to her personal circumstances. The narrative of her artistic life is dominated by references to her romantic relationships, labeled as unstable and the motivation of her artistic production and the cause of her suicide at the early age of 38. Regardless of the veracity of her interpersonal experiences, the stigma of the female entertainer overwhelms critical discussions of her labor. Read in this light, Reyes' *sentimiento* is entwined with the pathological and the marginal and is of domestic and suspect origin.

The myth of the temperamental woman simultaneously highlights and obscures her recalcitrant voice. Her technique developed in unfavorable conditions, far from the glamour and privilege that was bestowed on male *ranchera* performers with social and gendered immunity in the pursuit of success. As of late, she has additionally become a contemporary queer icon on both sides of the border for precisely her “queering” of the *ranchera* paradigm.

“Temperamental Woman”: vocal analysis

In addition to showcasing the gender politics of *ranchera* song, the studies on Reyes also evoke the difficulty of writing about the voice as a volatile historical artifact. Indeed, voice is the

carrier of an “uncanny slipperiness” and notoriously “capricious, wanton, unto itself” (Biddle, Gibson 228). In order to analyze the cultural politics of her voice, I extract telling details from key accounts that scrutinize (and often conflate) the idiosyncrasies of her technique and her personality. These studies fail to elaborate on the artistry of Reyes or to complicate the performative dimensions of her emotive intensity and its relationship with her own life. In this section, I discuss the outstanding points made about Reyes’ voice in the few sources available: the foundational status of her voice vis-à-vis the *ranchera*, the eminence of her timbre’s pathology, and, finally, its psychic transparency.

Any reference to Reyes, be it in music history books or reviews, echoes the line, “Reyes was the first woman to adopt the raw, belligerent style of singing that male ranchera singers used...” (Shaw 129). *The first*. Reyes’s sound and memory are marked by the dual burden and privilege, so to speak, of being “the first”. She is credited as the initial woman to sing *rancheras* with the uninhibited force of the *bravio* by some scholars and considered the original maker of this “fierce” sound by others. I am less concerned with historical accuracy than with the cultural repercussions of the declarations of Reyes’ presence as a “first”. Both claims are rich with figurative possibility: Reyes is encumbered with the carnal qualities of time, unlike several of her *ranchera* contemporary, among them Jorge Negrete, whose privileged voice evokes a timeless Mexican subjectivity (as his emotional life is not scrutinized in order to explain his voice). She is constructed within the same discursive terrain as Eve and la Malinche, granted invisibility and hyper-visibility in her symbolic ubiquity. Reyes’ intervention, in turn, translates as taking possession of masculine-identified qualities. The genealogy that exists about Reyes re-inscribes her body as merely usurping male territory

Moreover, in this designation of Reyes as inaugural (and sacrificial), there is an implied correspondence between voice and female anatomy, specifically the vagina. Theorist Kaja Silverman's point on the slippage between the two is illuminating in this respect. Even as Silverman develops her argument as it pertains to her study of cinema and voice (an analysis that I engage with later in this chapter), her point is a germane contribution here: "In classic cinema...there is an implied equation of woman's voice with her vagina, each of which is posited as a major port of entry into her subjectivity, but which is actually, I would argue, the site at which that subjectivity is introduced into her" (67). In the history produced about Reyes, there is also the unspoken connection between her voice and the discourse of female sexuality. As we may recall, her *bravío* technique came into being after her aphonia. That is, her unique and foundational sound is acquired after forfeiting the desired (for the culture of modernity) soprano resonance in the wake of illness. Her throat becomes the invaded organ, ruptured and clawed in two ways. The first is the physical process of aphonia. Secondly, the meaning of her singing voice is apprehended by the masculinist authorial position, which foregrounds the allegory of loss and of having fallen. This point takes us precisely to the preeminence of pathology in the discourse about her voice.

Bodily trauma is related to Reyes' foundational myth. In addition to accidental damage and disability, her voice sustained the stigma of alcohol and abuse. The heightened attention to these details amount to a privileging, in popular music, to the sounds "thick with body", with "grain", with "fleshly codes" that endow the voice with the aura and appeal of feeling (Silverman 62). "Feeling", as perceived and costumed in the voice, overturns the culture of technical impeccability. Yet, the proclivity for the "imperfect" rather than technical perfection also disavows a degree of agency from the singer. In this light, Reyes' physical voice yields a

fragmentary *sentimiento* that “suffers” as it innovates, an innovation that occurs because of “lack of choice”. What I am moving toward here is the inscription of Reyes’ damaged sound as a transcription of a damaged “soul”.

In *La Música Mexicana*, for example, author Salvador Morales begins the section on Reyes, “*La voz más bravía*”, with a note on her suicide that attributes Reyes’ emotional intensity to her success, and thus: “*Su tormenta interior, su intensidad emocional fue otro factor en su triunfo*” [Her inner torment, her emotional intensity was another factor in her triumph] (170). Morales’ comments insinuate that Reyes’ voice inspires a perverse fascination and facilitates a conclusion that forecloses artistry: her voice is the accent of her being. A reminder that persistent attitudes toward the body extend into the voice as well: just as a modern critic might relegate the body to representative status of a person’s intellectual life, the voice here reflects a visceral emotional world following an enduring Western metaphysical logic. Moreno Rivas, in another example, lists factors that contribute to Reyes’ *bravío* style in addition to her aphonia: “*la personalidad y la neurosis hicieron el resto*” [personality and neurosis did the rest] (190). The rationale that an inner life is responsible for her success facilitates the reading of the inherent sound emanating from a seemingly tragic life. Such an assessment of a lack of artifice, an absence of performance, so pervasive in studies of popular music associated with “the folk”, is in constant tension with brief allusions to technique and labor.

Morales, despite privileging a fatalistic reading of Reyes’ skill, also notes that she “*desarrolló una técnica basada en el escape melódico que dio a sus interpretaciones un sello personalísimo*” [developed a technique based on melodic escape that granted her performances a unique seal, my translation] (qtd. in Morales 169). Such a technique of “escape” allowed Reyes to open the “enclosures” and registers where the female voice presumably belonged is no doubt

related to how Moreno Rivas elaborates on the schematic pattern of Reyes' interpretation:

“Prodigaba su voz hasta desgarrarla, gemía, lloraba, reía e imprecaba. Nunca antes se habían escuchado interpretaciones en ese estilo” [She delivered her voice to the point of laceration, she moaned, cried, laughed and blasphemed. Interpretations in that style were never heard before, my translation.] (190).

In addition, just as the voice of Reyes is considered to grate and bleed, so to speak, a discourse that imagines a “wound” and “disables” her, this same narrative also suggests *ability* from a de-colonial perspective. This reversal of the “wound” is a tenet of the new mestiza consciousness, a concept introduced by Gloria Anzaldúa in 1987. New mestiza consciousness is a feminist epistemology that develops from the experience of borderland subjectivity, from the arduous effort to conciliate distinct or incompatible worldviews. Mestiza consciousness is grounded in Tejas-Mexico border life and its history of repression to the *campesino* communities by two nation-states and by ideologies of patriarchy. From her interstitial material existence, the new mestiza (and her allies) is a cultural worker that galvanizes social action and activism committed to the reinterpretation of history and of the self using new symbols and shaping new myths. One of these myths is the shadow-beast.

The shadow beast is part of the Anzalduan pantheon can help us understand and reimagine power relations derived from nationalist customs and practices. Anzaldúa's notion of the shadow-beast signifies the abject aspects of a culture, “that part of ourselves that we disavow and project onto others” (Hames-Garcia 106). The *india*, the Chingada, Malinche, the queer: all qualify, either symbolically or concretely or both, as shadow-beasts to Mexican, Chicano, or Anglo national cultures. They are born into societies that continually repress them in order to “protect” them. Reyes embodies several aspects of this shadow-beast. The fact that Reyes was

the daughter of a *soldadera*, a female soldier of the Mexican revolution, is likely to have contributed an example of gendered militancy early in Reyes' life (Orozco-García 107). Music scholar Antonia Orozco-García links Reyes' status as the daughter of a single parent and no paternal figure as a probable trigger to her development of the *bravío*. While this assessment simplifies the creative process, the prospect of relating the *bravío* with the legacy of the *soldadera* is important in theorizing how this method of song constitutes the embodiment of decolonial knowledge. The *soldadera* was partly glorified in art and popular culture as the *adelita*, the troop's sweetheart, yet the prevailing connotations associated with these women were prostitution and submissiveness. Well before the Mexican revolution, psychological evaluators deemed women military allies or fighters as backward and primitive sexual bait. Moreover, *soldadera*'s celebration as a token gesture never had any immediate political or material benefits to women.

The shadow-beasts endure both physical and psychic violence; this virulent abuse will not cease lest s/he is accepted and taken in. The process of continually coping and negotiating the status of abjection may turn into a skill, a source of knowledge that yields *mestiza* consciousness. I wish to apply the concept of the new *mestiza* to Reyes in order to focus on the *bravío* as sung by her as a manifestation of agency, as a process of recovery, not only of the voice but also of material resistance to impositions of propriety. The feminist *bravío* can thus be deemed a *mestizo* display of the "freedom to chisel and carve [her] own face" and, I would add, her vocal cords. To sing outside the parameters of genre and gender requires daring, risk and imagination. The *bravío* is a production affiliated with material obstacles and subalternity, but

also with involved effort¹². Thus, I consider Reyes's singing as the unlearning of the emotional representation of Mexican female subaltern, a process that also required Reyes' unlearning of her operatic training. Reyes is a rare example of how the *soldadera* worldview is materially manifested and is not just a symbolically celebrated, for instance, in song lyrics. The influence of a combative femininity is evident in her voice as well as the typical stances and movements she employed while singing, most prominently her assertively pronounced chest

The typical historical narratives that recount Reyes' trajectory, the foundational, the wound and the patho-psychological, amount to colonial gestures typically enacted upon notions of the feminine, the body and the 'other' in song. The conclusions of the investigations relegate Reyes' *sentimiento* to its literal translation of feeling and to a master narrative of feminine interiority and psychosis. Alternatively, in the endeavor for a decolonized reading of *sentimiento* as it is embedded onto Reyes' body, I analyze, in the following section, her participation as an anonymous singer (yet readily recognizable voice extra-diegetically) in selected Mexican films. I begin with a brief yet necessary background on the cinematic archive where Reyes made several appearances upon the request of *comedia ranchera* directors, who found her performance complementary to their productions.

Reyes and the *Comedia Ranchera*

The film genre stages the musical-emotional spectacle by Reyes and ushers in additional layers to consider in two main aspects. Firstly, Reyes is not entirely a "female character" in the

¹² For an important analysis of *soldadera* representation in the corrido, see María Herrera-Sobek, *The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis* (1990).

traditional sense that film theory might adopt. She is a representation of herself, a compelling crossover performer into (a newly debuted industry of) film with an already defined public (and vocal, via radio) image. She endows the film with powerful lucrative cultural capital: however, she is a figure with no apparent role in the diegesis other than “incidental” performer. Yet, even as Reyes is not strictly a character, she does take part in the symbolic order of the film; she is subject to the director’s choice of angles, shots, locations, etc. As a woman on screen that embodies the codes of *sentimiento*, her involvement in the film is simultaneously inseparable from the gaze and its repercussions on the feminine. How does the cinematic apparatus redraw or overwhelm Reyes’ signification? How might it (un)expectedly amplify her *sentimiento* as a force of transgression? The question of the gaze, even as this analytical undertaking is aware how privileging sight eclipses the other elements at work in performance, is nevertheless unavoidable and necessary here.

In order to broach the issues of representation that arise when *sentimiento* is doubly put “on stage” in cinema, I review specific issues of the soundtrack in Mexican (golden age) cinema and the unique importance and value of weaving in popular songs (often songs known before appearing in films) into narratives. Additionally, I examine the particular films and scenes that concern us here considering Kaja Silverman’s theories of representation of the female voice in cinema.

The introduction of sound to film in 1929 revolutionized possibilities for representation at a massive level. In Mexican cinema, this move resulted in deeply significant repercussions for nation-building. Sound made possible the aural perception of national traits, including speech, gesture and popular music on screen, transmitting through film what Jean Louis Comolli might call “dominant fiction” (qtd. in Silverman, 44). Furthermore, Monsiváis theorizes the goals of an

ambitious film and music industry beginning in the 1940s: to represent and disclose the essence of Mexico as imagined community, to “bottle” nationalism as a commercially viable product. The historical moment is the 1940s, when film was a contested space for the dissemination of a renewed national consciousness, or in the words of Linda Egan, when film was “the archetypal consciousness with which Mexican society dialogued with itself” (Egan 8). Such a dialogue included, of course, listening to “themselves” on screen in *comedias rancheras*, for example, with voices like that of Jorge Negrete or Lucha Reyes. Their singing voices, in addition to projecting the usual fetishistic power to evoke the illusion of inner essence conferred upon the voice by film theoreticians, also serve as technologies of belonging.

Comedias, debuting in the late 1930s, employed the *ranchera* as an incidental performance in terms of plot. These films include, on average, three to five musical episodes that vary in terms of duration and production, yet always feature an already wildly popular singer who is often the featured protagonist. The use of musical performance is then an indispensable amusement model for this genre that evolves from live entertainment culture in Mexico before the film boom.

Prior to their use in cinema, *rancheras*, unaccompanied by the notorious *mariachi*, were prominent features in the *teatro de revista*, a type of live variety show that proliferated in Mexico City during the revolution (Geijerstam 68). *Teatro de revista* shows, whether in a comedy of errors tone or a vein of biting political critique, amalgamated distinct musical genres, dance styles, and acting sketches (Moreno Rivas 69). Distinct venues for *teatro de revistas*, or *carpas*, developed throughout the capital, each catering to distinct publics, variances mostly divided along the line of class. Romanticized depictions of rural life were common in several performances. Subsequent film production of *comedias*, a hybrid film genre that “incorporated

elements of comedy, tragedy, popular music and folkloric or nationalist themes” (Hershfield 270), mimicked both the musical and thematic patterns of these *revistas*. *Comedias rancheras* often featured musicians and actors known at the local level, including Lucha Reyes. A sentiment in the name of both the popular and the national, made within a hegemonic filmic industry, was in the making as *comedias rancheras* depicted the nation’s idealized affective matrix, its ideal expressive modes, and the presumable emotional life of its subjects and the rural memory of their existence.

The narrative structure of *La Tierra del Mariachi* and *Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes!*, for example, incorporates these all-important musical interludes, where the protagonist, or another minor character, breaks into songs of praise to nation and women, resonating with the *teatro de revista* tradition discussed above. Musical performances featured as diegetic music are often the strongest element of a given *comedia ranchera*. Critics render these instances as events that simply “take up time” (Geijerstam), undoubtedly one of its roles. *Ranchera* performance numbers comprise a transitional structure from the theater-based entertainment to a cinematic event. The performance of song is manipulated to locate the singing performer, most outstandingly the *charro cantor*, as the transcendental repository of emotional fictions attributed to *el pueblo*. This idea resonates with how the visual and sonic economy of cinema is gendered, “working to identify even the embodied male voice with the attributes of the cinematic apparatus, but always situating the female voice within a hyperbolically diegetic context” (Silverman 45). That is, the feminine-identified timbre operates as a sign of interiority that implies not psychic privilege but mystery as well as bodily, narrative and spatial confinement (45). I will examine the three modes of enclosure separately. In the cinematic text, the disembodied voice occupies a space that cannot be seen, that is outside the lens, outside the

narrative, outside the control of the gaze. The omnipotent voice is associated with, and most often attributed to, the male voice in cinema. Thus, the embodied voice is a feminized voice, a voice of spectacle, a voice under control, a voice safely confined within the narrative.

The case of Reyes and her participation in cinema both confirms and challenges this argument on the bisected economy of voices in film. For, Reyes' vocal performance parallels that of the *charro cantor*: a repository of a collective sentiment and private emotion, the embodiment and individualization of *sentimiento* who simultaneously expresses the universality and *mexicanidad* of emotion. However, unlike the male ranchera singers, Reyes was never the starring actor in any film in which she appeared. Her participation, though achieving a taste of extradiegetic transcendence at times, results in an ambivalent cinematic presence: simultaneously the embodiment of emotive transcendence and the sound of the carnal and staged woman. Her *sentimiento* is thus filtered through the lens of these *comedias rancheras* in ways that imitate the very discourse that constructs her style as personalized, unique and broken to a degree of mystique absent from the *charro*. I now wish to address how Reyes' *sentimiento* functions within specific scenarios of *comedias rancheras*. I begin with *La Tierra del Mariachi* [The land of mariachi].

As part of the *comedia ranchera* genre, *La Tierra del Mariachi* (Raul de Anda 1938) spatially presents a rural setting peopled by *charros*.¹³ The outstanding element at work in the

¹³ Uninventive and trite, the film follows a conventional approach in every aspect of its production. The plot explores a thwarted love affair between a wealthy young woman, Isabel, and her suitor, Jorge Vargas, who migrates for a year to *el norte* (United States) seeking to save enough for their marriage. Despite the obstacles that prevent Jorge and Isabel to marry upon his

film is the music, namely Lucha Reyes' participation, where the themes of the film are foregrounded through *Adios*, *Sufrimiento*, and *El Castigador, rancheras* by Pedro Galindo: parting, distance, suffering, spurned love. As solely a "background" singer, Reyes is nonetheless a constant presence in this brief film; she sings in four distinct scenes evenly distributed throughout the feature.

Her first appearance is "vocal" and not visual, an instance of female disembodied and extradiegetic sound. An unseen Reyes sings 'Adios', as the still camera shows the entrance of a *hacienda*, Posada de la Luz, while men on horseback enter or leave the space. The melancholy lyrics are enriched by the suspenseful melodrama projected by Reyes, one that drags the vowels together with the voice as it articulates the reluctance of separation. Her meta-narrative position, visible to neither the viewer nor to on screen characters, confers onto her voice a rare authority as it is less diegetically anchored.

The second scene stages a handsomely dressed Reyes. Wearing a medium sized sombrero fastened below her chin with a ribbon, Reyes briefly looks into a booklet she holds as she prepares to sing and switches onto the vocal persona of the song "*Sufrimiento*": the distant lover. She sings surrounded by two guitarists in a plaza before an audience the full song in under two minutes, "*voy a empezar a cantar/ voy a empezar a cantar/ por que traigo un sentimiento* [I'm going to sing/ I'm going to sing/ because I have a feeling (suffer)]". Reyes draws out the last syllable of "sentimiento", a common technique enforced upon lyrics that emphasize a rationale discussed earlier in this chapter: public performance of a voice read as "suffering" implies an unequivocal inner torment. In a series of shot/reverse shots that suggests a mirroring between the return to San Miguel, the problem is promptly solved. In an act of self-defense, Jorge murders Isabel's other suitor.

singer and the people whose sentiments she expresses, Reyes and her musicians perform while spectators, mostly men and children dressed in humble, peasant dress, look on with admiration. The chorus of the song continues and concludes with the line “*ay ay ay ay*, how much I’ve suffered for you!” and with the enthusiastic *gritos* from the audience. Reyes, who outside of her duties as singer in the film remains an anonymous character (though a known persona, or rather, voice, to the film audience), asks the audience for requests “ask me whatever song you want, I know all the hits of the moment: ‘*Estas como rifle*’, ‘*La Panchita*’, ‘*El Hijo Desobediente*’, and the *corrido* of the Holy Virgen de Guadalupe”. Her participation in this second appearance imitates the *revista* pattern, as she dazzles “the people” and petitions for requests from them. After these words, the focus of the diegesis turns elsewhere, to another performance in the same plaza. Reyes’ audience disperses toward the other spectacle as the director abandons the musical interlude to continue with the narrative rhythm of the film.

The third time Reyes re-appears as an entertainer is in the *cantina*. In this space marked by masculine domination, the *charro* protagonist, who does not sing, encourages his colleague to take the stage. His friend acquiesces, and walks toward the center of the saloon. From a balcony where the musicians await their turn to entertain, Reyes descends from a stairway. Always visually aloof, she performs a duet with the *charro*, the song *El Castigador*, a jubilant ranchera where Reyes again is clearly the star entertainer. The camera focuses solely on them from the same angle the entire time from the perspective of the customers. Finally, Reyes performs for the last time soon before the film’s end, after a horserace. Mounted on a horse in the outdoors together with other *charros*, and as the mariachis play beside them, Reyes again sings “*Adios*”, the disembodied song that initiates the story. Even as Reyes is in the position of symbolic power (on a horse together with the other men), the point of view is too far from Reyes or any other

equestrian; the movements of her singing are not quite visible. In her equestrian stasis under the sun, Reyes is picturesque but somehow disembodied, the vigorous voice not quite connected to the motionless image.

As a repository of *sentimiento* within the cinematic apparatus, Lucha Reyes is both outside the story and within it, both the embodiment of diegetic transcendence and an incidental woman “on stage”. A character that provides a key component of the soundtrack and exists beyond the narrative, Reyes’ disembodied voice in the first performance, “Adios”, is a rare and all too brief manifestation of authority. Thus, while director De Anda’s choice situates Reyes potentially close to his own position as almighty and all viewing, she ultimately does not fully mimic the definitive extradiegetic position of the cinematic *charro*. Rather than, or in addition to, effecting exteriority, the space where classic cinema situates the male character and the male voice, Reyes, and thus her singing, depicts interiority. One way to equate women and the female voice with interiority, as Silverman argues, is to enclose the female voice “into what is overtly indicated as an inner textual space, such as a painting, a song-and-dance performance, or a film-within-a-film...male subjectivity is then defined in relation to that seemingly transcendental auditory position, and so aligned with the apparatus” (56). Because Reyes is solely a performer in the feature, the previous citation can situate her performance of *sentimiento* as a framed, limited and controlled incursion into the narrative as the film confines Reyes to song and to spaces associated with masculinity, where her movement is limited to her vocal apparatus. Because singing is certainly not limited to women in *comedias rancheras*, however, the question remains of how the embodied male singing voice differs from, or escapes, this quandary. How does Reyes’ patent of emotive expression and her recalcitrant grain become a reduced, charming cinematic instance?

Even as the *charro cantor* is often the propelling force of the narrative while the singing woman is merely a supportive device, I wish to address this question and complicate it further in the following section, where I discuss the film *Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes!* The previous example of “*El Castigador*”, where Reyes sings a duet with a male protagonist, does not expose the issues evident in Rodriguez’ film, for, in *Ay Jalisco*, Reyes and one of her contemporary stellar performers, singer/actor Jorge Negrete, sing the song (which gives the film its name) of regional pride in separate scenes. This dynamic demonstrates how both singers embody the antithesis of interiority/exteriority, but also how Reyes’ *sentimiento* is distinct from simply entertainment, and it proposes its own worldview. First, I provide an overview of Negrete, *charro cantor*, a major cultural and aural icon of *mexicanidad*. Then, I engage in an analysis of his and Reyes’ performance in *Ay Jalisco*. My analysis demonstrates how Reyes’ representation, despite being susceptible to the perils of the gaze, conversely opens a third space feminist practice that is not merely a representation of tragic or marginal feeling. In her ability to exceed the propriety of Negrete’s performance technique and even threaten its lead, Reyes’ cinematic appearance does not merely equate her with femininity or with an impenetrable, disabling inner world.

Ranchera idol Jorge Negrete (1911) portrayed the idealized *charro* as it was re-invented for the cinema: a light-skinned, tall, imposing gentleman. Ironically, Negrete was never an aspiring singer of *ranchera* music. His practice and training were in the Italian bel canto operatic style during the late 1920s and early 1930s. *Bel canto* was then a popular genre with the Mexican upper class. His instructor, Jose Pierson (1861-1957), heard in Negrete a solid singer with the potential of becoming ‘like [the Italian opera singer] Enrico Caruso (1873-1921)’. Writer and theorist Carlos Monsiváis has elaborated on how Negrete (problematically) embodied the image of *mexicanidad* and gave voice to its sound through the *ranchera*, articulating the fiction of its

essence. With his dexterous execution of the *ranchera* using his classical vocal training, Negrete generated a sound clearly distant from the peasant roots of the genre he ironically represented. As the articulate, tasteful, tuneful mouthpiece, he serenaded the “passionate but tuneless” lowbrow audiences, as Monsivais sardonically states.

His technique and the greater ideological underpinnings of his performance, thus, were quite distinct from the vocal strategies of Reyes. Negrete applied the technique to deliver not only fervency but also to display edification. His educated voice suggests a pedagogical purpose: to showcase a way of using the technology of the cinema and the disciplined, and disciplining, voice. Thus, the power of his performance generated not *sentimiento* but rather an aloof, artificial admiration. The labor he invested in singing *rancheras* recalls Emma Perez’ formulation of colonial/decolonial desire, wherein, I propose, we can read, or listen to Negrete as a manifestation of the former. That is, his overall performance assumes power relations as they are and ultimately never achieves a reconfiguration of them. Negrete pursued his dream of opera, dismissing the profession his middle-class conservative family was partial to: the military, where he learned to ride horses. Both activities, singing and the military, conflate into his future position as *the* beloved *charro cantor*.

The *charro* is an enduring trope in politics and music, the umbrella term for horseman in Mexico. The *charro* of *charrería* is in charge of a spectacle of mastery over a creature that is also a beloved possession, the horse. The *charro*’s dress is similarly symbolic, highly elaborate and varied throughout regions and the class status of the wearer. The typical suit is a wool suit of an austere color, stitched with silver or gold buttons and threads that form intricate patterns, laterally along the sleeve. Decorative pleats may be placed along the sides of the pants. A handgun is strapped to his belt. The dress enhances and legitimizes the *charro*’s performance in

his role as the authentic Mexican horseman, for in its most elaborate, it transmits a message of both social status and loyalty to Mexican “authenticity”.

The cinematic *charro* appears as early as the 1920s in a silent film, *El Caporal* (Contreras Torres, 1921). With the advent of sound, the voice and songs of the *charro* were enjoyed at a mass level. Popular culture and mass culture conflate at this historical period in the Americas and particularly in Mexico, facilitating the emergence and wide, mediated dissemination of the singing horseman figure. Such a phenomenon must not be taken lightly: nationalism here is synonymous with the application of certain cinematic formulas: *Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes!* is a clear, resounding example of the glamourization, glorification, domestication of a violently ambiguous icon, a benign movie idol whose gun evoked an authority that was also associated with the power of his voice.

The *charros* as portrayed by Negrete (as well as other actors) on screen were thus saturated with the symbolism of authority, power and masculinity recurrent in mythical and literary culture. In addition, the golden age imaginary invested the *charro* on screen with dramatic traits: a hard-working and noble man, the *charro* also had to be handsome, romantic and musically inclined (Nájera-Ramírez). Alejandro Galindo, a Mexican filmmaker, notes that Negrete specifically portrayed the Mexican ideal type in *Ay Jalisco no te Rajes*, (and thus, in most of his subsequent work): “dark-complexioned, tall, proud, romantic, pistol-packing and who sings his sorrows as readily as his joy” (qtd. in Nájera-Ramírez 9). The portrayal of musical proclivity is particularly key to add a dimension of interiority:

In film the *charro* sometimes exhibited aggressive and even abusive behavior, such as excessive drinking that led to barroom brawls and a general mistreatment of women. At

the same time, however, the *charro* gained sentimentality, expressing his innermost sentiments through music, specifically the *canción ranchera*. As a national hero, then, the *charro* became much more complex because, while the sentimental traits served to humanize the *charro*, they also offset his violent and abusive behavior. In other words, because the *charro* possessed redeeming humanistic qualities, and because his ends justified the means, the *charro* was forgiven all his faults. In this way the negative qualities became palatable, acceptable, and for some, perhaps, even valued. (Nájera-Ramírez 9)

What is particularly attractive in Nájera-Ramírez' observation is the purpose of the voice and music in the cinematic narratives that the *charro* embodied. The singing *charro* on screen projected a transparent, privileged subjectivity: a sensibility that contrasted with and redeemed fits of rage or vengeance. Generally, singing is the physical, material evidence and metaphor of the *charro*'s interiority and personhood. Thus, contrary to orthodox interpretations of gender and cinema, in *comedias rancheras*, masculinity is endowed with diegetic agency that includes the realm of interiority often reserved for the feminine. The allure and transgression of engaging seemingly contradictory activities is, however, most intriguing in Reyes' performance.

¡Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes!: Song and Film

To briefly examine the lyrical content of this song, which both Negrete and Lucha Reyes sing, will further enhance the analysis of the performance, for Negrete enforces the thematic content with his execution, while Reyes contradicts it. The film *¡Ay Jalisco no te Rajes!* is based on the song of the same name, written by musicians Manuel Esperón and Ernesto Cortazar. The writing of rancheras as diegetic scores by Esperón and Cortazar was fundamental to the Mexican film industry from the 30s to the 50s. They wrote and produced the music for the cinematic

charros to sing. Their collaboration generated an impressive repertoire of songs that are now classic and popular pieces: “*Traigo un Amor*”, “*Si Adelita se Fuera con Otro*”, “*Me he de comer esa tuna*”, “*Yo soy Mexicano*”, “*Cuando Quiere un Mexicano*”, are just some of their melodies. “*Ay Jalisco no te Rajes*” was first known in the voice of Lucha Reyes (I discuss this later), who popularized the song. A selection of the lyrics with my translation, which encompass its essential idea, follows:

<i>Ay Jalisco, Jalisco, Jalisco</i>	Oh Jalisco,
<i>tu tienes tu novia, que es Guadalajara</i>	You have your beloved, its Guadalajara
<i>Muchacha bonita, la perla más rara,</i>	Lovely young woman, the rarest pearl
<i>De todo Jalisco es mi Guadalajara.</i>	Of all Jalisco is Guadalajara
<i>Y me gusta escuchar sus mariachis,</i>	I like to listen to the mariachis
<i>Cantar con el alma sus lindas canciones,</i>	To sing their songs with my soul
<i>Oír como suenan esos guitarrones,</i>	To listen to those guitarrones
<i>Y echarme un tequila con los valentones,</i>	And have a tequila with the brave men
<i>Es tu orgullo su traje de charro</i>	Your charro suit is your pride
<i>Traer su pistola, colgada en el cinto</i>	Your gun fastened to your belt...
<i>Pa’ mujeres, Jalisco primero</i>	Jalisco has the finest women
<i>Mujeres muy lindas re-chulas de cara</i>	Beautiful ladies with heavenly faces
<i>Tus hombres son machos y son cumplidores</i>	Your men are macho and committed

<i>Valientes, y ariscos y sostenedores...</i>	Brave, Fierce, Breadwinners
<i>¡Ay, Jalisco no te Rajes!</i>	Oh Jalisco, don't back down
<i>Me sale del alma cantar con calor</i>	To sing with warmth is my soul's desire
<i>Abrir todo el pecho, pa echar este grito,</i>	To open this chest, to deliver this cry
<i>Que lindo es Jalisco, Palabra de Honor</i>	How beautiful is Jalisco, you have my word

Esperón and Cortazar, in their music and lyrics, actively develop Jalisco as a heteronormative patriarchal imaginary of national eminence. The song is a tribute to the western state of Jalisco, romanticized as the ideal Mexican region and attributed with the uniqueness of Mexican modern tropes that conform to the greater mythology of the nation: tequila, mariachis, and *charros*, to name the most ubiquitous and trite. Jalisco became the synecdoche of the nation: its capital, Guadalajara.¹⁴

¹⁴ A principal reason this state became the preferred locale to both represent the folklore of the nation was due to the internal migrations of mariachi musicians from rancherías, to cities, to the capital in the 1920s and 30s (Jauregui). These demographic moves were not unidirectional; following the seasons of farming, musicians would return to work the land. They established a pattern of migration that promoted the exchanges and evolutions of popular musical styles. In a national atmosphere soaked with the fever for authentic folklore, these musicians were sought after in the capital by political factions, who wished to re-present themselves by having these groups play in rallies, congresses, or other public reunions. Politicians thus promoted their agendas utilizing the labor of mariachis, and these musicians also sought such prominent sources of income as well. It is highly likely, then, that the prominence of Jalisco representation in film

The song begins with a simple allegory: Jalisco and Guadalajara represent, respectively, the virile men and the beautiful women of the state. A gendered binary, the first of several, is then established using the grammars of heterosexual romance and chauvinistic pride. The natives of Jalisco are endowed with the same virtuous or virile attributes of the state and the city themselves. Jalisco “has a sweetheart”, the female gendered *novia* in Spanish, Guadalajara. Presumably, the song is written from a male perspective, for it is the singer who proclaims his love for drink, music and singing “with soul”. The song is written from a first-person, male-centered point of view not only in terms of authorship but in execution (Jáquez 173).

The climactic, jubilant chorus is a plea to Jalisco, and by extension to the male listeners, to never yield or surrender their manly word and integrity. This unyielding trait is considered by Octavio Paz to be a quintessential quality of Mexican masculinity in general: they do not desist, give up, back down, *no se rajan*. The verb *rajar* connotes several meanings. In addition to give up, it also means to slice, to crack, which can be a thinly veiled reference to the sex of the female anatomy. In his canonical study of the Mexican character, *The Labyrinth of Solitude* (1950), Paz infamously interprets, monolithically, Mexican being and its relationship to gender:

The speech of our people reflects the extent to which we protect ourselves from the outside world: the idea of manliness is never to ‘crack,’ never to back down. Those who “open themselves up” are cowards...the man who backs down is not to be trusted...he babbles secrets... Women are inferior beings because, in submitting, they open themselves up. Their inferiority is constitutional as resides in their sex, their submissiveness, which is a wound that never heals (29-30).

and music has to do, partly with economic difficulties of farmers and with the vigorous and intense efforts of migrating musicians in the decades prior to the 1940s.

Paz' analysis of masculinity reveals the idiosyncrasies about gender embedded in language. The verb *rajar* implies, in its seemingly innocent deployment in the song and in everyday life, the production of a corporeally based moral division between the sexes. The expression of the song, Oh, Jalisco, don't back down [*no te rajes!*], directed at a geography of imagination (Jalisco) that represents the origin of the *charro*, is meant to encourage manly fellowship and recognition. Keeping in mind that Paz' musings are also products of his time, his class and his gender, his writing does maintain a striking assonance with the contents of *Ay Jalisco*. Paz was writing nearly a decade after the film; I do not seek to suggest there is a direct correlation, but that rather, the film is a domesticated version of the issues Paz is concerned with. Clearly, this idea of not backing down is not a trivial thematic choice by Cortazar, the writer of the lyrics. *Rajar* enacts a multiplicity of subconscious associations with gender taboos, and associates certain revelations and vocal inflections with women. The statement "*Jalisco, no te rajes*" is, more than an encouragement, an order for the preservation of masculine honor.

The women of Jalisco is an additional theme: the song mythologizes/fetishizes their beauty and their visage. In addition, such beauty is the (pleasurable) instigator of violence among men. The song does not attribute guilt but instead suggests it as a primary characteristic of the feminine in this imaginary. Moreover, the gain of the female booty after battle is coupled with singing near the moonlit lake to her. Alternatively, the men, in addition to being macho, are granted the qualities of stubbornness and are praised for being dependable benefactors of the family and unrelenting when it comes to love rivals. Again, the feminine is the potential destabilizer of harmony and male dignity. Additionally, the pride of the self-made male is his charro legacy and the material evidence of his authority: both his gun and his guitar. Clearly, the song glorifies particular gendered attitudes and behaviors.

¡Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes! : Film Overview

In this segment, I briefly discuss the film *Ay Jalisco* in order to provide a foundation for the more detailed discussion of key singing performance scenes that follow this section. *Ay Jalisco* premiered in 1941 and was received nationally and internationally with unprecedented success. In Mexico, as in the rest of Latin America, Negrete became an overnight sensation; this was the film to launch his career as the idolized *charro cantor*. In Argentina, *Ay Jalisco* was a record-breaking film, playing for six months. Moreover, the film stimulated the production of more “Jalisco” themed films in Mexico, a motif that was already at play before 1941: *Jalisco never loses* (1937), *Jalisco loses at long last* (1945), *That’s how we love in Jalisco* (1942), to name a few (Serna 51-52).

Ay, Jalisco’s narrative builds on the main themes of the song reviewed in the previous segment: regional and manly pride. The film follows an expected course that poses Salvador (Negrete) as the hyper-masculine hero and romantic seducer, clearly establishing the gendered identities within the nationalist narrative. Orphaned, Salvador is humbly raised by his aging Spanish godfather, Radilla, the owner of the local cantina, a choice by the script writers that cements the *criollo* heritage of the main hero. Once grown, Salvador, Malasuerte (a retired Spanish bullfighter) and Chaflan plan a scheme to avenge the death of Salvador’s parents. In this configuration, it is the light skinned mestizo who plans, organizes and is obeyed.

Salvador, Malasuerte and Chaflan undertake the adventure of vengeance with success, and several scenes demonstrate their merriment and singing in *palenques*, serenades and other venues

that they enjoy along the way. To add to his manly conquests, Salvador is able to win back Carmela from Carvajal.¹⁵ The film ends with a long, wide shot that exhibit the vastness of the rural milieu. A cart, ridden by Carmela and her young niece, is flanked by Salvador. As the riders leave behind the camera, they disappear into the line of the horizon.

There are two scenes important to point out from this film. Each is a musical instances executed by Negrete, marked by his leadership and seduction (submission). The making and representation of emotional depth and subjectivity onto the *charro* is enacted through the male singing voice and specifically through Negrete's. The song, however, is not only the alibi for the *charro*'s expression of tenderness and sensibility associated with the feminine. More than humanizing the figure of the *charro*, these instances of song demonstrate the omnipotence of this now articulate trope. Such aggrandizement inhibits, subtly, instances of song by any other, illustrating a politics to his singing intricately tied to gender.

¹⁵ In the film, Felipe Carvajal is a foil to Salvador's character. Carvajal is Salvador's rival in winning the affections of Carmela, the demure, fair, soft spoken *señorita* of the story. Felipe is an urbanite lad, son of a powerful businessman, who with his fashionable suits, knee-high boots, silk handkerchief around his neck, and tie contrasts the ideological baggage of the *charro*. This male figure alludes to the modernizing forces present at the time of the films release in Mexico. Furthermore, his presence also suggests a threat to 'genuine' national identity, particularly if we consider that the *comedia ranchera* "registers the conservative, authoritarian, and paternalistic political strain that marks Mexico's political culture, especially after Lazaro Cardenas' presidency" (De la Mora 83).

The first involves the platonic midnight encounter between Salvador and Carmela before the former leaves to accomplish his adventures. Salvador and his young accomplice, Juancho, arrive to the front of Carmela's large window, reinforced with iron grates, which faces the street. Such a setting is a familiar enactment of serenade courtship, one that tritely mimics the architectures of the prison. It is the woman who remains inside her virginal realm, clutching the bars with stoic desire and timid whispers. Salvador sings to her, teaching her a short song that showcases Negrete's vocal edification. In a series of shot-reverse shots, the visages of both actors fill the screen as he serenades Carmela. The camera gets increasingly closer to each face, but much more to hers, distorted in a near-blurred image that does not show her neck. To echo Barthes on Greta Garbo, "her face was a sort of transformation of flesh into an absolute ideal which could never again be attained or lost" (qtd. in Martin-Barbero 217, my translation). Negrete's fine mustache, slender long nose, small playful eyes, the bow around collar and large broad rimmed hat contribute to the exposure of another aspect of virility: his voice. Singing an aria a capella, Negrete's skill is all the more evident as his baritone agility covers the lower to higher notes, clearly too powerful a song to perform into the beloved's ear. Nevertheless, Carmela listens silently. Even as she tells him she doesn't know how to sing, he humorously insists, throwing his head back slightly, saying "all the women of Jalisco sing."

After Salvador ends his song, it is Carmela's turn. Music plays in the background. The sway of a gentle brass instrument interlaced with a violin begins in an atmosphere with the markers of the innocent. Salvador hums, encouraging Carmela to begin to sing with a gentle gaze. Carmela, visible at the same distance that glorifies her facial features, looks down at the paper with the lyrics and moves her mouth without emitting a sound while the music continues to play. The lighting favors the creation of a halo of white from her skin, resplendent and nearly

forbiddingly refulgent. After nearly a minute of more reverse shots between them, she hums. Salvador sings, as if helping her.

This scene charmingly confirms the supportive role of the feminine in song, as well as her visually dominant role. Moreover, while she seconds Salvador, alone, she is only capable of humming, with a saccharine quality evident in her high, pleasant pitch. If the women “of Jalisco” can sing, they don’t undertake it on their own initiative, but due to the patronizing influence of the lover. Moreover, this murmur points us to an additional matter in question: the singing voice and the speechless voice. The humming of the female protagonist alludes to a feared historical characteristic in western song: speechless singing emanating from a woman’s voice, the Siren. Her gentle murmur without words, quietly sung, epitomizes this sensual trope that has always threatened patriarchy and the logic of logos. This juncture confirms another point in Silverman’s theory of the correspondence between femininity and interiority in film: woman is rendered speechless, her voice is reduced to a humming, inarticulate emanation, and is able to speak only through masculine willpower, instruction or request.

In the innocent, sigh-inspiring scene of quintessential romance, the masculine figure confirms his exclusive dominion over intelligibility, clarity and mastery of song. Similarly, those who are depicted as “mute”, unable to sing, include Salvador’s love rival, the cosmopolitan Felipe. In a face off scene later in the film, they meet outside Carmela’s window: Salvador joined by a mariachi band and Felipe with a jazz ensemble. The *charro cantor* sings couplets and challenges his opponent to musically respond, a task Felipe cannot achieve and asks the musicians to carry out.

The second scene features the jubilant performance of Salvador of “Ay Jalisco, no te Rajes”. As I reviewed earlier, Salvador performed songs in the romantic enclosure of the

midnight serenade and the private confrontation between rivals that anticipates a fistfight. This time, Salvador sings in a restaurant/cantina/bar scene, a venue that demands a collective effort of euphoria in order to produce the Mexican fiesta. Even as the *charro cantor* commands the execution, controls the direction and signifies the limits of musical and gendered expression, the *fiesta mexicana* featured here includes the participation of a variety of archetypes (*charros*, tequila, mariachis, female smiles) and archetypal sounds (*ranchera* voice, mariachis, *gritos*). However, the scene is not a chaotic instance of celebration; it manifests a carefully choreographed venture that subtly reveals the gendered hierarchies, where the *charro cantor* is the outstanding presence. This scene incarnates the stereotypical scenario of festive *mexicanidad* as imagined through Jalisco and as is often repeated in Golden Age film.

Salvador (Negrete) is the representative embodiment of national *sentimiento*, and he does so precisely in this scenario of festivity. In using ‘scenario’, I invoke Diana Taylor’s term as a way to frame this scene as part of a formalized, pervasive method of depicting the nation in film that serves to reify, condone or re-imagine existing power relations. Perhaps the *fiesta mexicana* does not necessarily develop a traditional plot, as Taylor’s notion does entail a narrative as well as embodied acts. There are some elements of plot, however, in the *fiesta* as mediated by film, which begin with the grand entrance of the *charro* and the equally grandiose closing, as he sings, his voice accompanied by, yet superior to, the *pueblo*’s. If we are to consider the fiesta as a scenario that produces a depiction of national, regional and/or civic *sentimiento*, then the role of this voice in this scenario is particularly important, how it travels, how singing bodies respond to it or exist relative to their (social, gendered) position. The event needs the arrival of the *charro* and the proclamation of his ‘voice’ for its stimulation and consummation. Upon his arrival, the

men can continue drinking to his song, the women can carry on with their laughter, the musicians can begin playing; the *charro* ignites the fire of the *fiesta mexicana* and moves it forward.

Yet, before the appearance of Salvador in this particular segment, three women appear before his performance. The angelic voices of these women clear the sonic space for the incoming robustness of the *charro cantor*. First, a light skinned woman stands, her hands sweetly resting at her hips simulating a defiant pose. She smiles, wearing a long-sleeve, flower-printed dress. One braid falls over each shoulder decoratively. She begins to sing as she walks forward and is joined in song by two other women off-camera. They soon enter the space, one from each side, dressed in similar clothes and swinging the *rebozos* (shawls) wrapped around their waists. All three sing a chorus of the song that seems to have been modified in tune and melody to fit their high register. They sing and repeat the word ‘Jalisco’, each time representing a higher-pitched, longer pronunciation.

The camera approaches the women gradually. They begin humming a melody, recalling Carmela, repeating a similar purpose: vocally reinforcing Negrete’s baritone, tainting it ever so slightly by interlacing it with a feminine marker. They finally sing, ‘*que lindo es Jalisco*’ together. The playing of trumpets accompanies the words “*palabra de honor*”, beginning the official song, signaling the physical and vocal entrance of Salvador to the space. The cheerfulness of this now classic song, a staple for any mariachi band, is due to a “musical exuberance” accomplished using musical structure of the *polca* (Jáquez 175). The *polca* is a rapid musical composition, a “double metered piece rhythmically organized around each beat divided into an even upbeat and downbeat”. In a sense, it has that ompa-ompa-ompa, up and down merry movement that induces partner dance. Yet, no one dances in this scene.

As Salvador enters the space in the midst of the crowd, he begins to sing, sauntering firmly, debonairly. He owns and examines the space. The camera follows him. His is a voice that digs deep into the lungs and emerges powerfully and authoritatively, fitted to match his impressive, elaborate *charro* suit, a distinguished outfit that further outshines his male companions. As he sings the first stanzas of the song, Salvador walks past the chairs, tables and columns until he spots the three singing women. His hand reaches toward the chin of the woman in the middle while she lifts her head up and smiles. The other two men do similarly with her companions. Yet, Salvador is always center-screen.

The depiction of male fellowship and complicity is further achieved in the prominent role of drinking culture. As Salvador continues singing, “and I love to hear those mariachis, sing with my soul, their beautiful songs...and have a drink with the brave men”, the camera simultaneously focuses on a drinking man. The man sips from a bottle, wipes his mouth, slams the empty glass onto the table.

In the following sequence, two of the original female singers are marginally visible at the side, wooed by Salvador’s goofy companions. The virile protagonist grabs their arms, one after another, and pulls them towards him, the song being the alibi of the forceful pull towards the center. He hails “Jalisco, don’t backslide”, once more, looking at one woman, then the other. He sits and they follow. The camera gets closer, until we see only Salvador and his large hat.

Even when the women do sing in the midst of Salvador’s performance, they remain subordinate. Salvador is again at the center of this scene flanked by Chaflan and Malasuerte. The women sit on their laps, standing as they begin their intonation again, their high, delicate voices paying homage to the men by singing the stanza about the virtues of the *charro*. Such choreography superficially reverses their seated, nearly infantile position as they stand up, one of

them caressing Malasuerte's cheeks. Even as they rise, sing and seduce, throwing their heads back slightly, playfully defiant, the spectacle and charm of their femininity remains subordinate to the phallic figure of the *charro cantor*: their acts do not compete, but complement, his power. The men are delighted, egging on the singing women, hopelessly sighing and smitten. Such performance of manliness evokes the condition of being *enamorados* (easily in love), a reference to womanizing (de la Mora 101).

Men in the surrounding areas give out their *gritos* of pride and euphoria, what should be the very sound of spontaneity, of authenticity. *Sentimiento* is thus the careful production of a cinematically mediated choreography. But Negrete must end this endless parade with his own singing. He stands tall and upright between two of the women singers. He booms, "Ay Jalisco, don't give in!..", the camera slightly angled upwards, creating an "upward gaze" effect that enhances his top position as a handsome, valiant and capable *charro*, as the powerful and masterful voice able to articulate and supervise the authentic sentiments of his countrymen, acknowledged and acclaimed by 'the people'. More than portraying a man called "Salvador", Negrete was rehearsing the creation of his own myth as a cultural icon, aided by the infrastructure of the cinema, as a celebrated vernacular singer and representative of Mexican masculinity, the 'original' *charro cantor*. Lifting his broad hat into the air, the other men do the same, while the final note of "honor" collectively resounds in all directions.

In the visual and aural exuberance of this scene, voice marks a position in a social and gendered hierarchy, proposing a gender politics to the popular sentiment voiced by Negrete. Above, and superceding, the rest with potency, volume and refinement is Salvador's voice. Even as he is not alone in this enterprise, his voice stands out from this event and extends itself though the scene: his voice is unavoidable, just as he is the more imposing, tallest, most firm in his

unhurried gait and movement. His solo is the only one in the performance. He is the one capable to emit, by himself, the railing exclamation, the words, to transform individual feelings of vainglory and collective feelings of the national into a physical manifestation worthy of the *charro* and of his country. In his baritone timbre, palimpsest of arias, operas and military commands, he nourishes the tune of regional pride and by extension, and represents the sound of *mexicanidad*. While the trio Calaveras, the anonymous three women, and the scattered *gritos* by nameless men are appreciated in the performance, their charming interventions are necessary but limited aural support for the carefully chosen, cast voice of the star actor. Yet, this is not the only rendition of the song in Rodriguez' film. The first rendition we get of "Ay Jalisco" is Lucha Reyes'.

Reyes has no role in the film's diegesis; she could be easily relegated to a similar fate as the other women singers, who remain nameless with their voices saccharine and forgettable. With close attention to the sound regime she propels, however, it is clear she fulfills more than a slot of benign entertainment within the framework of *Ay Jalisco*. Her scene takes place in a *palenque*, a 'cockpit'. The *palenque* is a traditional performance space, usually erected in rural locales. A range of spectacle takes place there, rooster fights and vernacular musical performances being the most common. It is a large circular outdoor amphitheater, often featured in Mexican films. In an essay that outlines the mythical environments in Mexican cinema that are also "box-office formulas and official limits" of the golden age, Monsivais lists the *fiesta mexicana*, and includes the "fierce woman" as essential in this imaginary (Paranaguá 118).

In the case of *Ay Jalisco*, the *palenque* scene achieves a dual purpose: first, to stage a fatal cockfight where Salvador finds and kills one of his parents' murderers. To a much lesser degree and focus, one that I want to amplify here, the second feature is the performance of "Ay

Jalisco!” by a woman, Reyes. She is the in-between act of *peleas de gallos* (cockfights), of bloodsport. Unlike the carefully staged performance where Salvador is the gravity and point of reference for all that is sung, Reyes’ appearance would seem rather marginal. There is no moment of transition into her performance, no dissolution or time passing, simply an abrupt appearance, a woman’s sudden *grito* and raised voice. In her analysis of the film, Siboney Obscura Gutierrez notes that this scene frames Reyes as a transitory device to highlight the entrance of the *charro cantor* into the space where he becomes the admired hero. My task here is to shift the perspective, despite the inflexibility of the cinematic archive, and re-focus the performance, and voice, of Reyes. She sings “Ay Jalisco” as well, only this time the song that transmits, as Monsivais snidely has noted, the idea of the “eloquent defense of male identity” (Paranaguá 118), is sung by a woman.

She opens her mouth and emits a loud note as soon as we see her, waist up, in a medium shot, forcefully, damningly, *in medias res* of her musical act. There is hardly any time to assimilate the doll-like sweetness conveyed by her attire. She wears an ornate, long dress that nearly covers her entirely: pearl necklaces, a white bib that extends from her neck to her waist, decorated with frills. The bow in her hair marks an extravagant detail of the feminine. Clearly, her attire conforms with the previously examined feminine wardrobe worn by the female singers, which points to a more general tendency of the period to consolidate not only the *charro* as part of the folkloric mythology of the nation, but also his female companion.

Yet, contrary to these archetypes, Reyes does not smile. Her eyebrows are slightly furrowed. Behind her, a crowd of *charro* men sitting on the rows look on at Reyes. The mariachi trumpet players off-screen blow three rapid notes into their instruments before Reyes attacks with a sharp and loud *Aaaaaaaaay*, released from the top of her lungs. (Did she take a deep

breath just before? Or was that a dangerous use of her throat?) . She walks as she sings, slowly and defiantly, moving her upper body in a subtle sway, her micro-motions accompanying and catapulting her cry towards the sky. According to some scholars, Reyes, in her performances, reproduced a confident mastery of the stage with defiant moves that borrowed from the soldadera legacy, the woman warrior during the Mexican revolution (Garcia-Orozco 105). Thus, while Negrete as Salvador cites the historical embodiment of political power and renegade masculinity, Reyes fashions her body with the visible and audible inscriptions of women that, despite being key players in the creation of a nation-state, remain subaltern. However, Reyes' singing, as Negrete's is not a token reproduction or representation of a historical figure.

She sings the same song Negrete performs later, the anthem for Jalisco. As she continues her "Ay, Jalisco, do not back down" chorus line, her gaze moves upward toward the sky. She raises her forearms and palms in a supplicant position, softly shaking her hands. Reyes' potent *Aaaaaay* exposes and renews the trajectory of her training: exposes, due to the endurance and volume of her breath, and renews, because she explores the limits of its force, the spaces, musically and physically, of its application.

Her voice captivates Salvador and his companions. As Reyes continues singing, they walk into the first row of the *palenque*, looking for seats, looking at Reyes. Several other men are visible in the medium shot: conversations, or the sharing of a silent moment of enjoyment, among men are backdrops that confirm the *palenque* domain as a male-dominated one. Again, the camera is back to the singer. She sings the words "to scream with warmth", her hands collected at her chest, her right hand open before her heart, her 'caloor' another trailing off vibrato. Her voice sways between singing and screaming and extends vowels to interminable lengths and nearly unbearable amplification: *Me saaaale del almaaaaaa, gritar con caloor*.

‘*Saaaale*’ and ‘*aaalmaa*’ are belched with a dry-throated resistance and insistence. Without a microphone, the open space of the *palenque*, unlike the enclosed venues that might provide echoes, require her to project at the expense of any pain or discomfort associated with the *bravio* Reyes projected, with the uninhibited exploitation of the voice’s volume. Her facial features are stern and confrontational, looking to her left. Her exposed affect does not coincide with feminine normative representation upheld in Rodriguez’ film, nor with the lyrics. On the contrary, her facial expressions are (unedited) grimaces, unbecoming of ladylike propriety. Fulfillment, or, femininity, is performed in an entirely alternative way here.

Once Reyes is done with ‘*calor*’ the r’s rolling with vibrato, she immediately turns to look the opposite way, looking at the audience in the high and low seats. Her earrings dangle and her curls bounce. She is aware of and owns the performance space, and begins her vocal ascent, “*abrir todo el pecho, pa’ echar este grito!* [to open this chest! to give out this cry!]. Reyes abruptly and with speed raises her right arm and drops it immediately, unfurling a choreography of defiance and a pantomime of intense feeling that does not follow the formula of gratuitous smiles, modest movements and vocal restraint seen by women in the *fiesta mexicana*. From below and from the center, her voice communicates more through its method. Without smiling, she looks pleased. The acting of the men behind her displays enthusiasm that inflates once she erupts with the nationalist (regionalist) declaration, nodding her head once with determined affirmation: “how beautiful is [this land], you have my word”! The movement of her head is a categorical nod to the affirmation of her statement. The masculine audience cheers, and an interlude takes us, first, to the mariachi musicians, tucked into a corner with their instruments, followed by Salvador and his companions, the camera finally settling onto a closer view of them

sitting in front-row seats. Salvador smokes a cigar and takes pleasure in Reyes. He nods with approval (Affirming admiration? Possession? Condescension?)

Reyes approaches them while she sings the refrain about the horseman. In this sun-drenched scene, Reyes and the camera move jointly toward the spectators. Her fists rest on her waist, her unhurried gait is accented with hubris, her gaze looks down at Salvador. She sings “their guns...fastened on their belt”, while slapping her thighs gently, provoking further delighted *gritos*. One other woman with long braided hair is seated in the front, reminding us that a few other women are in attendance. Prowling back and forth between S.P.G, *Malasuerte* and Chaflan, Reyes finally settles and sits by Salvador on the edge of the *palenque* circle.

While she sings seated, looking away from the men, Salvador sits still, moving only his eyes and keeping his cigar in his mouth, while the other two try to get closer to her, their fascinated eyes wide open. The music keeps playing, the same *polca* rhythm animating and leading to the song’s conclusion. Suddenly, Reyes jumps off her seat, apparently from a squeeze Salvador gives her. *Ayyyyy*, we hear her cry out again, the comedic timing in sync with the timing of the song. Angered, she walks toward Chaflan and Malasuerte, who salivate with gusto, while she rubs her thigh. She grabs and pulls Malasuerte’s tie without warning, an act that does not stop his nor Chaflan’s fascination for Reyes.¹⁶ Her strong, disarming presence is one with agency, and her unprecedented style indicate her self-command of her own sexual desire. However, this strong presence is represented as a spectacle for male entertainment.

She walks away as the song comes to an end, singing the phrase we first heard her declare. The screen is again hers, “to open this chest, to give my *grito*”, she raises her right palm again deferentially as the final notes resound praising men and their land. Her scene is followed

by more cries, and an immediate transition to the betting and the cockfight. She disappears from the narrative just as suddenly as she appeared, evaporated between effluvious praise and the anticipation for the fight, as if she was never there. In the scenario of the *palenque*, she is a passing and not passive figure, appearing and disappearing here according to the narrative and desire of the film's director.

The *Bravío*: Possibility for an-other sentiment

It may well seem that the film's "absent one", in depicting Reyes as a partial spectacle "complete" only in the voice and performance of Jorge Negrete, the masculine identified directing lens echoes the psychoanalytic reading by Silverman of the female voice's equation with grain, with a palpably distinct timbre that suggests technical and social deviation. That is, Reyes' vocal style when singing "*Ay Jalisco*" is much more corporealized. Even as the *bravío* style that Reyes introduced to the *ranchera* music world is indeed a technique of the body, to borrow Marcel Mauss' phrase, that radically departs from a Eurocentric practice of song, the film magnifies the grain as entertainment and minimizes its effect on the diegesis. Her aesthetic is represented through the logic of the familiar (tragic) female entertainer. To sustain this reading is to recognize the problem but not fully engage the possibilities of the decolonial imaginary that Reyes' *sentimiento* presents. Before a detailed discussion on the relationship between Emma Perez' framework and Reyes' *sentimiento*, I review what Reyes' performance means in the film's context.

Reyes re-interprets and renews the song and radicalizes the gendered vocal scheme of the film. In her brief intervention, she renders a performance depicted as instigating collective

euphoria through song, a male prerogative throughout the film. Similarly, she disrupts the configuration of voices within the political economy of *machismo* and *marianismo* prevalent in *comedias rancheras* like *Ay Jalisco*. The construction of *marianismo* in particular derives from Judeo-Christian based-ideals that persist since the inception of New Spain. While *machismo* upholds the prevalent ideology of male supremacy, an attitude that in Mexico is intricately tied to the nation-state, *marianismo* is a similar doctrine that “perpetuates gender roles subject to Christian values, in which women should be self-sacrificing following the ideal of the Virgin Mary” (Arrizón 221). *Marianismo* promotes a disciplined and patriarchal vigilance that I argue concern the sounds of the body, not only speech, but the volume, texture and timbre produced in the voice. Silence, together with chastity, was a most desired trait of the Christian woman in New Spain. The discourse that women ought to maintain the “house” and silence, avoid loquacity that seduces, disrupts, and/or blasphemes, echoes in the film, in the discreet and resigned characteristics of the spineless Carmela.

In both Reyes’ and Negrete’s performance, singing permits affective transgressions. For the *charro*, as Nájera-Ramírez has already noted, song confirms his humanity and justifies his moral superiority. Conversely, all women in the film, including the singers that accompany Negrete, use their voices as a supporting device to accompany or accommodate a male central figure. In the case of the singers, they uplift a musical structure where their act remains subordinate and their voices synchronized, orderly, and ordinary. Even as they raise their voices, they do so in modest and euphonious ways that ultimately maneuver lyrics, mnemonic devices that reify their social role as ‘women of Jalisco’. Reyes, however, presents the quandary of participating in a public activity typically reserved for and enjoyed by men. Song is also her transgression, one that is represented as ephemeral, in the same space where roosters are displayed before a delighted

audience. Rather than simply equate Reyes' inclusion in the narrative as an incidental pleasure, an unseen fatality, her destiny shared with the roosters, I'd like to review the theoretical framework developed by Emma Pérez, one that aids in the recovery of Reyes as a practitioner, through her vocal aesthetic, of third space feminism.

In an effort to uncover the neglected histories of Chicanas in orthodox historiographies, Emma Pérez, in her book *The Decolonial Imaginary*, proffers a theory that refutes colonialist methodologies. Her framework aids in the recovery and uncovering of Chicana voices relegated to silence, that is, of the interstitial space where one can “practice third space feminism to write a history that decolonizes the imaginary” (20), a space that is “within and between dominant male discourses” (32). I believe that *sentimiento*, as practiced by Reyes, opens such a third space feminism. Even as Pérez writes from the context of Chicana history, her framework is flexible and applicable to performance studies, as she herself provides examples of this feminism with cultural icons such as Tejana singer Selena and the politics of her representation in cinematic text and memorialization.

Third space feminist practice, Pérez continues, is the exercise that effectuates the category of decolonial imaginary. To utilize this alternative category is to recognize its antithesis, the colonial production of history. That is, the colonial imaginary as History has excluded the Other, particularly in its maneuvering of notions like “orient”, or in the context within which Pérez works, “frontier” or “Manifest Destiny”. In the present analysis, we may consider *bravío* and *ranchero* as sustaining a narrative of coloniality. In contrast, the decolonial imaginary, borrowing from notions generated from postcolonial theory, is the worldview that makes strikingly palpable ways of being, and I would add ways of feeling, systematically rendered unfathomable, or only available as categories of deviation or criminality. Earlier in the

discussion of Negrete's singing, I invoked the colonial imaginary as it was sustained by his technique. Reyes, though she is represented within the colonial scenario that *Ay Jalisco* depicts, and even as the director would wish to install her there as object, is also enacting a third feminist practice in utilizing her vocal apparatus in a way that lacerates. To borrow from the verb *rajar* (discussed earlier as meaning "to slice" and also a reference to the female sex), she opens her throat in a way that offends the patriarchal imaginary, an imaginary that can only include her as marginality. Reyes slices the conventional method of song, resigning the lungs and using the throat in a way makes audible the production and the end product. Her voice slices into the sense of hearing, which at the moment was not used to hearing a woman sing a *ranchera* in a way that defamiliarized both gender and genre. I contend, thus, that Reyes constructs a decolonial imaginary with her singing and deposits its power within the film. In insisting on the "imaginary", one can also disavow the accidental and the tragic for a deliberate act of conscious singing and depiction of feeling.

To return to Silverman's analysis of femininity, interiority and cinema, she mentions, but does not explore, the voices of actors Garbo and Hepburn, whose timbres evoked the potency associated with masculinity. It is precisely in this space of ambiguity where Reyes effectuates third space feminism in the film, in the larger cultural production she engendered with her performances, and in the imaginary of forthcoming singers.

Yet, what is it about her performance, her voice that is "decolonial"? How can the voice be subject and object to these categories? Both Reyes and Salvador (Negrete) employ a singing style called *bravío* (fierce) a word with truculent and vicious connotations applied to singing with grandiose, unapologetic attitude and a resonating voice (see introduction for further discussion). The making of the fervent expressions in the *bravío* style of the *canción ranchera* is

historically imagined from a male perspective. Additionally, the *bravío* is described using the body: *bravío* “is a new form of execution that directly utilizes the throat” (qtd. in Obscura Gutierrez 70) and produces a “raw, belligerent style” (Shaw et al. 129). The voice that sings this style is codified with the perceived sounds and force emanating from a gendered body. The definition provided by Geijerstam, “with masculine strength and authority”, encapsulates the colonial imaginary of traditional Mexican music historiography with regards to the *bravío* at its most clear, locating an origin and a standard within the masculine identified body. *Ay Jalisco*’s diegetic engine grants the same authority and will to Negrete, or the male imagination. Yet, to read from a distinct perspective, the film disguises histories of voice, the development of the *bravío*, and the role Reyes had in it. As Pérez reminds us, the decolonial imaginary “challenges power relations to decolonize notions of otherness to move into a liberatory terrain” (110). This is precisely what Reyes does in her cultural production at large, and can be most appreciated as the interstitial feminist practice in the film. Let us review further how the decolonial functions in her singing.

Clearly, she leaves behind a method of singing that locates the essential origin within the lungs—her procedure might employ such knowledge, but it also utilizes the throat, a region of the vocal apparatus more closely associated with popular song, performed in ‘dubious’ locations and if emanating from women, it marks them as performers of ill-repute. In Negrete’s voice, the throat, or any other organ, is not “heard” in his singing. The purpose, particularly in the *bel canto* tradition that Negrete was trained in, a style in vogue with the elite in early 20th century Mexico City, is to eliminate blemishes in the vocal chords. While Negrete is considered an exemplar singer of the *bravío*, the adjective is merely metaphoric, the voice costumed as timeless—in Reyes, the voice is synecdoche of *bravío*, bringing the bodily interference, sounding the very

“wildness” embedded in the word. The way her body and voice as Lucha Reyes has been written by music history scholars evokes her portrayal in the film: a fetishized, fascinating, singular voice that cannot compete with or de-stabilize the male universe of the *ranchera* world, neither in Rodriguez’ narrative nor in her fleeting career.

The difference between Negrete’s and Reyes’ singing of the “*bravío*” is not merely a problem of sexual difference, but of method, a different attitude toward the body, and thus, about the (ab)use of the voice. Both were trained, as mentioned before, within the classical regime of opera, Negrete applied his knowledge and unaltered technique of an elite singing tradition to the vernacular and newly developing musical realm. His disciplined voice was to remain controlled and controlling, endowed with the brazen and fearless attitude of the *charros* he portrayed. His singing of music marketed and diffused through film as authentically Mexican. Negrete’s image and timbre, vocalized using his *bel canto* training with expanded lungs and deep breaths, conveys the sentiment of ‘Jalisco’. Like the steeds he rode masterfully in his films, his voice is a trained and quelled instrument, also evoking the elite spaces of concert halls and the desire for the refined (one biographer claims Negrete redeemed the *canción ranchera*). Flawless, clear(ly masculine), potent according to classical operatic standards, Negrete’s voice institutes the cult of machismo (Monsiváis 107) and circulates its political economy (family, *patria*, *marianismo*) as sonic materiality. After his participation in *Ay Jalisco*, the requirement for any male protagonist in any *canción ranchera* was a potent singing voice.

While Negrete’s voice evokes a timeless Mexican subjectivity, one of a handful of privileged male voices, Reyes’ voice is both *bravía* and blighted: her ability to sing *bravío* attributed to the pathology of her aphonia. Consider also the following remark: “While she recovered, her voice was coarse and raw sounding. She was no longer a soprano, and the

mariachi trademark *estilo bravío* (savage or wild style) was born” (Greathouse 109). Or: “The first great diva of ranchera music was Lucha Reyes, whose emotionally charged voice hinted at her own inner turmoil” (Broughton et al. 468) The statement is innocuous at first read; it hints at the genealogy, to borrow Foucault’s oft-cited framework, that exists about Reyes, which re-inscribes her body as merely usurping male territory. Moreover, the latter citation insinuates a superficial, affected voice as it evokes the truculence that signifies the *bravío* in order to explain her tumultuous life: her voice is the accent of her being. A reminder that persistent attitudes toward the body extend into the voice itself: just as a modern critic might relegate the body to representative status of a person’s intellectual life, the voice here reflects a visceral emotional world.

The method of Reyes is both inclusive of her training, as well as a conscious effort to experiment with the physical limits of the voice and of its use according to gender. Moreover, her method changes the epistemology of both singing and gender as a regime of patriotism. This is where the function of the film as representation is revealing—Reyes is not a character in the plot, but rather her inclusion suggests a need to foil not only characters vis-à-vis each other, but a developing ideology of the voice that contrasts with the universalized voice of Negrete within the same film. The unorthodox use of the throat is a defiance that is not taken too seriously within *Ay Jalisco*. Moreover, I believe Reyes’ significance points beyond the celluloid frame. If we consider that Reyes stimulates the *palenque* scene and its attendees within the script, who is listening to her voice and what do they hear? Is it merely a reproduction of Salvador, or Negrete’s, purpose; that is, to listen to words about Jalisco, about bravery, about beauty?

In an interpretation that complements the third space feminist reading of Reyes’ performance in *Ay Jalisco*, Antonia Orozco-Garcia discusses *la cantante bravías*’ use or abuse of

breathing techniques and her adaptation of movements of belligerence and arrogance as a model of feminist consciousness. Orozco-Garcia interprets the *estilo bravío* as a challenge to what she calls the “Culture of Modernity” in Mexico, a culture that promoted femininity and its associated behaviors of submission and discretion, a definitive allusion to *marianismo*. A woman singing the *bravío* “demanded respect, changed the pronouns of the lyrics...questioned male privilege...challenged sexual norms...changed pronouns to songs” (Garcia Orozco 105). I would add that the innovative deployment of what can also be heard as a ‘damaged’ voice proposes not only a feminist attitude, but also an alternative to the representation of the ‘popular’ by the historical and cultural scaffolds that construct Negrete’s singing voice as Mexican, as masculine, and as authentic.

Furthermore, Orozco-Garcia, borrowing from Salvador Morales, historically locates the *bravío* as a stylized, choreographic palimpsest derived from *soldaderas*, women of the Mexican revolution. These women participated in and contributed to the revolution in various capacities. Although the specific details are not clear, Orozco-Garcia cites Reyes’ mother, Victoria, a former *soldadera*, as part of a demographic that failed to receive any monetary or social benefits, unlike their male counterparts. Women participants of the revolution were thus consigned to a deliberate oblivion despite being subsequently promoted in popular culture as a nationalist myth (107). According to this reading, Reyes’ *bravío* style promulgated an unheard style, a structure of feeling concocted by unknown women soldiers who sang for themselves, and accompanied their performance with “determined hand and facial gestures”. Orozco-Garcia privileges not the tragedy myth and comes short of identifying the Reyes’ *bravío* as a device of/for desire, specifically the desire to memorialize and historicize through the body.

In addition to the relationship between Reyes' vocal technique and the women warriors and assistants of the revolution, her lyrical training and literacy in classical voice performance endow her *bravío* with the qualities of *mestizaje*. This vocal *mestizaje* that generates the *bravío* is one emerging from and appealing to the working-class majority, who appropriated Reyes as their own. Orozco-Garcia notes how Reyes "mocked classical singers" by including classical vocal techniques, including trills, to the *ranchera*, a choice that provoked the derision of "classically trained musicians" (137).

Negrete and Reyes are thus singing the same song, yet using their bodies in distinct ways while doing so, ways that have repercussions for how they are framed by the narrative. The film is, for the listener attuned to the "third space", not only merely a repeated instance of feminist, subaltern subjugation, but a marked articulation that hints at the decolonial imaginary. This understanding helps to undo the perception and manipulation of the 'fierce woman' in the *comedia ranchera* diegesis, where she is fetishized and disappeared. Reyes' singing voice is then not only an excuse for the entrance of the *charro cantor*, an interpretation that is possible if one considers her brief and sudden appearance. Her vocal production is an important alternative to the refined, hybrid vocalization of Negrete that, in its selective, alluring and somewhat concealed combination of styles and training, privileges the deep breath of hierarchy that elevates masculine subjectivity above all else.

The enunciation and process of *mexicanidad* as delivered by Reyes is a subtle unlearning of a culture and technique of gender impeccability as applied to Mexican nationalisms at the moment these were being produced. By shifting the anatomical source of production of the voice, by offering the throat as her "base", by raising the decibels through the perceived obstacles of the body, making audible a grain, to evoke Barthes, inhibited in the sounds of the

singing *charro*, Reyes demonstrates that the *bravío*, as sung by her, necessarily demands a challenge to the supremacy of a taken-for-granted *machismo*. Her voice is not metaphor of “brave” or “fierce”, but is the synecdoche: her voice materializes the word “*bravío*”. Reyes expands a way of feeling the body, a way of singing the body, an epistemology of singing that anticipates a modality of popular song and sentiment, and cites the revolutionary appeal of the *soldadera* body. She, in re-imagining the anatomy and autonomy of the physical voice, creates a wormhole looking into the future of the century: women like Chavela Vargas re-citing this example in another context.

Clearly, there is a sinister signification to the sound of Reyes in the film that is quickly solved by the director. I call this signification and sound a performance of *sentimiento*. Within the de-colonial imaginary, *sentimiento* is not a translated notion, “feeling”. Rather, *sentimiento* must be understood as an alternative knowledge, typically inhibited, in this case, in film and through the techniques of film, that springs from the uses of the singing voice and announces itself as both essential and detrimental to the basic tenets of *mexicanidad*. How do we encounter these voices of renegade, subaltern sentiments in other archives? What happens when the lyrics do not point towards a gendered project of hegemonic nation-building. The next chapter will address a distinct re-presentation of *sentimiento* as projected and performed through the voice of a woman who, in 2002, recalls listening to the voice of Reyes on the radio during the 1930s. This woman, Chavela Vargas, wrote, “Back then, I had no idea there was another way to sing the *ranchera*, but as Negrete and Reyes did,” an opinion that her style and career contradict.

CHAPTER THREE

TRANSNATIONAL LAMENTS AND THE QUEERING OF *SENTIMIENTO*

Chavela Vargas' 2003 debut in Carnegie Hall was a rare event. Vargas, 83 years old at the time, stood in front of a captivated audience that doted on her with undivided attention. Upon listening to that night's recording, *Live at Carnegie Hall*, one can imagine how, for the first few minutes of the concert, Vargas slides into the view of the attendees, who clamorously greet her with resounding applause. Photographs of that evening display a confident and smiling singer draped in her black and red *jorongo*, crowned with coiffed, short white hair, her arms extending outward during the most empathic moments as to recall the celebrated phrase from filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, "*nadie, exepto Cristo, puede abrir los brazos como Chavela Vargas*" [No one, except Christ, can open her arms like Chavela Vargas] (Knights 94).

The second song in the concert, "Un mundo raro" [A Strange World], is the first *ranchera* of the night. The audience recognizes this classic by singer songwriter José Alfredo Jiménez, whose extensive repertoire included beloved representations of the defeated macho in love. The audience collectively cheers the delicate guitar introduction to the song. An embittered, rancorous anthem for the brokenhearted, "Un mundo raro" is nevertheless a poetic declaration that references a "strange world" where people "never feel pain, always triumph in love and never cry". Such a description of bliss is the antithesis of the *sentimiento* that Vargas, an openly lesbian singer, epitomizes: the careful expression of desolation and the bitter admission of defeat and amorous ruin.

The musical introduction gives in to the lone voice for several seconds, "when they talk to you about love", the last word is resentfully delivered as Vargas pushes "love" through her

throat forcefully, her eyes grimacing, the crowd feasting on her robustness. *Gritos* from the audience evince the presence of attendees familiar with the codes of ranchera reception—Vargas might not be in Mexico, but the resonances of transnationalism and globalization are audible through several of her boisterous listeners. Moments of vocal lucidity, patches of interruption and uneven tone that come with age characterize her singing. Her singing of the ranchera now is a roughened palimpsest of her earlier *bravío* endeavors mixed with sensual, sung murmurs.

Vargas' New York presentation is an extraordinary convergence of elements, including the performance of the *ranchera*'s masculine lament through the queer body. In this chapter, I select key narratives from the various cultural and historical sediments palpable in this Carnegie scene. I relate how Vargas' voice—her sapphonic voice-- points to submerged histories of transgression *and* domestication. Vargas was a trailblazer who dislodged the *ranchera* from its adherence and loyalties to patriarchal identifications; she queered the *ranchera* lament in the 1950s and thus provides a critical scenario of queer *sentimiento* expressivity. My analysis of Vargas' representation of masculinized defeat through an abject female masculinity, to borrow Judith Halberstam's phrase, in her early career is followed by the exploration of her performances of the same repertoire several decades later. While Vargas performed internationally at the outset of her career, it is not until the 2000s that her profile became transnational. Thus, this chapter traverses *sentimiento* as a disidentificatory practice by a subject who negotiates the patriarchal imaginary of the commercial *ranchera*. During her late career, audiences and producers subtly mediate Vargas' performances as an exotic commodity. In sum, the two aspects of *sentimiento* I examine here may be succinctly condensed in the term queer exotic, an idiom that conveys the possibilities of phenomena that may occur when “otherness of [the self] and the notion of desire for the other” (Powell vii) may coincide.

The magnetic reception of Vargas by a transnational audience not only reveals the queering of the masculine lament in a distinct historical light—it also demonstrates how the circulation of *ranchera* virile economies reanimates the role the consumption and mediation of affect has in reinforcing the fascination with the “other”. As a legendary performer of a notorious past, Vargas is framed throughout the late phase of her career as originating from a space of raw, aggrieved emotion. A thin line between admiration and gendered/emotional exoticization tensely conjoins the opinions about and admiration for Vargas. The affective output of her late career circulates as an exotic agent deemed simultaneously universal and particularly Mexican.

After a brief overview of Vargas’ general history, I discuss in detail the shift in thematic content and expressive method of the *ranchera* of the 1950s. I pay particular attention to the work of the prolific and idolized singer-songwriter José Alfredo Jiménez. Jiménez, a dear friend of Vargas, was the author of several of these *rancheras* of heartbreak she chose to perform. By surveying key passages of her memoir *Y si quieren saber de mi pasado* [And if you wish to know about my past] (2002) and analyzing her vocal performance in the albums “*Chavela Vargas con el cuarteto Lara Foster*” (1961) and “*Live at Carnegie Hall*” (2003) I demonstrate how this appropriation of a masculinist subject position through the voice intersected *sentimiento* with a sapphonic sensuality.

Then, I fast-forward to the late ‘90s and early 2000s to discuss Vargas’ performance as a transcultural phenomenon. I continue with an inquiry into the intercultural repercussions of her Spanish debut, noting how her “discovery” by a Spanish promoter, and the support by elite cultural producers like director Pedro Almodóvar, led to a “Chavelamania” across the Atlantic. *Sentimiento* as performed by Vargas, in this occasion, is akin to a profitable raw product of feeling, freshly made by the octogenerian woman who provokes Spain to weep. I conclude with

a discussion of Vargas' 2003 Carnegie Hall performance, and the proposition that Vargas' queer lament is reworked as a personally expressive effort that epitomizes the "feeling" of *latinidad*.

To Sing like the Mexicans

I begin with a foreboding statement by Isabel Vargas Lizano: "*no esperen que cante lo que no puedo cantar, no tuve la mesa puesta*" [do not expect me to sing what I cannot, I did not have it easy], conveys a tone of adversity derived from a difficult childhood. The phrase also foreshadows the nature of the songs she chose to sing. Their names convey a hopelessness dotted with resilience: "Amarga Navidad" (Bitter Christmas,) "Fallaste Corazón" (Failed Heart), "Arrieros Somos" (We're Muleteers). As a child and teenager growing in Costa Rica, Vargas experienced a precarious life. In her memoirs (2002), she recalls harvesting coffee, picking fruits and herding cattle as a child. She connects her experiences as a child laborer in the fields with those of other young workers in the Americas: *los niños de Latinoamérica, si alguna ves pueden leer estas líneas, sabran de lo que digo. Digo de golpes y humillaciones, digo de abandono y desprecio, y digo del miserable acto de explotar a criaturas que solo desean llegar a mañana.* [The children of Latin America, if they can read these lines, would know what I'm talking about. I'm talking about blows and humiliations, I'm talking about abandonment and scorn, and I'm talking about the exploitation of young beings who seek only their own future.] (23). Vargas actively manifests her identification with an oppressed demographic in a testimonial context. She claims her identity and denounces the injustice experienced by farm workers at the same time she provides a motif of fatalism to an audience hungry for sensationalist details.

She recalls how a linguistic surrogate for ‘homosexuality’ was necessary: “*mis padres, mis hermanos...utilizaban para mi homosexualidad la palabra ‘rareza’*” [my parents, my brothers...used the word ‘rarity’ for my homosexuality] (25). Vargas discusses her sexuality in a fashion that echoes histories of abjection immersed in silence. As Carlos Monsiváis reminds us, “what is not said, does not exist” (*Los que tenemos*, 12). *Rareza* was the word that permeates her narrative and gains nuance as she discusses her career, her singing or alterity in general in terms of *rareza*. The use of this word is a discursive choice that she highlights in order to enhance the meaning of the various ‘differences’ she represented, as well as a foreshadowing device that anticipates her “queerness” as a claim to artistic triumph, one which easily slips into the queer exotic¹⁷. It is this being “strange” that Vargas herself exploits and that advances the mythology and fascination around her.

Vargas decided, in her early teenage years, to flee to Mexico at age 14. Upon her arrival to Mexico, she was determined to pursue her desires to sing “like the Mexicans” (*Y si quieres saber*, 51). Considering the first decade of her life in Mexico transpired between the mid 1930s and mid 1940s approximately, Vargas refers to the popular modes of vocal execution exemplified by the successful artists promoted through film and radio, including Jorge Negrete and Lucha Reyes. Between her arrival to Mexico and her first official recording a time span of nearly three decades stretches. During that period, Vargas earned a living in various, poorly paid jobs. It was not until the late 1940s that she sang as a paid hire at the radio station of the *Lotería Nacional*, the national lottery. Thereafter, in 1961, aided by her colleague and friend José Alfredo Jiménez, Vargas published two LPs, *Noche Bohemia* and *Chavela Vargas con el cuarteto Lara Foster*. She enjoyed success, though not comparable to other idolized singers of

¹⁷ I borrow this term from the anthology *Queer exoticism: Examining the Queer Exotic Within* (2010).

the time, performing in Mexico, Cuba, and South America. However, by the 1970s, Vargas' alcohol addiction took a toll on her career. Her professional resurgence occurred nearly two decades later, in the early 1990s.

Sincerely Defeated and Endlessly Drinking (Wo)Man

The title of Chavela Vargas' memoir, *Y si quieres saber de mi pasado* (2002), is a lyrical fragment of the well-known *ranchera* mentioned at the outset of this chapter, “*Un mundo raro*”. This particular song belongs to a musical catalogue associated with (masculine) romantic affliction, a repertory that debuted in the 1950s and differed from the jubilant *ranchera bravía* of the previous decade. This shift entailed a detachment from the exultation of national space and women to the expression of the disillusion of love. The *ranchera* lament created a subjectivity of feeling thoroughly centered on male melancholy yet also suggestive of a subaltern grievance. Vargas engaged the *ranchera* as a transgressive medium: her sapphonic timbre¹⁸, to borrow Elizabeth Wood's concept, and the queerness or “*rareza*” of her butch *campesino* image helped constitute a *sentimiento* that was at once sought after and reviled, familiar and queer. This section discusses in more depth how the *ranchera* of lament and its thematic and emotional foci differs from the *bravío*, how such modification altered the affective output of the singing subject, and Vargas' (dis)identification with this *sentimiento* of the Sincerely Defeated, Proudly Afflicted, and Endlessly Drinking man.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Wood's term 'sapphonic' is descriptive of a mode of singing that conveys and incites lesbian desire. This voice may be a physical manifestation or a textual representation.

In this non-celebratory strain of the genre, the pathos of (romantic) relationships became a prevailing lyrical theme and the first person address to the (female) beloved, the common narrative mode. The pompous, assertive, and cheerfully exuberant representations of hyper-masculinity typical of the *ranchera bravía* necessarily transformed as well. Vocally, the style of the *ranchera* also transfigured in ways that abandoned operatic agility and virtuosity; the singer must impress not with a multi-octave range, but with the facility to convey a more complex, often aggrieved spectrum of emotions. *Sentimiento* entailed a more meditative method of delivery that hinted at moral/physical exhaustion and resignation. Singers maneuvered the sounds of bitterness, spite, grudges and despair. This emerging style glorified the expression of personal intimacies rather than collective manifestations of regional or national identity. In this configuration, an artificial yet naturalized opprobrium encircled the suffering (male) *ranchera* singing subject.

The subject of *ranchera* lament was now embroiled in defeatist tropes of self-pity and wretchedness. That is, (gendered) power was not measured by affective possessions or material richness, but in the exhibition of suffering from repudiation, in letting go, and in declaring the sadness of being “so low and to fall again/ of being so lost and of loosing once more”, to quote a José Alfredo Jiménez song, “*Que suerte la mía*” (What vile luck). Jiménez was a key figure and singer-songwriter in the development of this sentiment. The myth of masculinity he embodied, as Monsiváis discusses, represented “that extraordinary friend who both scorns and is scorned, who nests in self-destruction and memory, does not fear humiliation nor doubts hating the ungrateful woman” (88). Several of Jiménez’ songs adopted and foregrounded the primary colors of resentment: bitter amorous defeat instead of conquest, an emphasis on the aggrieved ending of things, of relationships and of life. This emerging vein of the genre became the platform of

articulation for a defeated subjectivity. A shift in notions of maleness was afoot: a vocal, corporeal indulgence depicted in the failure to assume the idealized romance and to achieve contentment ensued.

Consider the performance of “*Un mundo raro*”¹⁹ as sung by Jiménez. The song is a softly delivered request addressed to the abandoning lover. Jiménez, who recorded it in the 1950s, sings it gently with his thick timbre, mimicking the calmness of a near tearful plea, commanding his beloved to not mention their past lest she feel/remember its beauty. A richness of subtle tones marking a slight difference between tenderness and aching can be heard throughout the recording. He never raises his volume beyond that which he uses when he sings “*no diré que tu adiós me volvió desgraciado*” [I won’t say your departure disgraced me], and never sounds more emphatic than when he intones he will say the lie “*que triunfé en el amor*” [that I triumphed in love]. Each note is carefully enounced to transmit a righteous self-pity, each word is painstakingly uttered in order to produce a sentiment deep-seated in not having, and a pride based on being the abandoned.

¹⁹ The lyrics follow: “When they speak to you about love/ and reverie/ and they offer you the sun and the sky/ if you remember me/ don’t mention it/ Because you will feel/ love of the best kind, mine/ and if they wish to know/ about your past/ it is crucial to say a lie/ say that you come from/ a strange world/ that you don’t know how to cry, that you don’t understand love/ and that you’ve never loved/ Because wherever I go/ I will speak of your love/ like a golden dream/ and forgetting all spite/ I won’t mention that your departure disgraced me/ And if they want to know/ about my past/ it’s crucial to say another lie/ I will tell them that I come from / a strange world/ that I don’t know about pain/ that I triumphed in love/ and that I’ve never cried” [my translation].

The link between romantic expression and social memory is important to illuminate in this analysis. In addition to re-constructing the affects of masculinity, the *rancheras* produced by Jiménez, can also be read as vehicles that not only express romantic defeat and loss, but also provide a repository and platform to express a sentiment of social subalternity. Even as the lyrics (of those songs Vargas chose to interpret) clearly allude to romantic relationships, their expressive power in performance suggests the voice of a subject aggrieved beyond an intimate, sentimental world. That is, these songs also represent what Carlos Monsiváis calls *la vocalización de los vencidos* [the vocalization by the defeated] (*Amor Perdido*, 97) they delineate a script of downfall, inciting genuine identification but also admiration for what may seem a picturesque depiction of an underclass. “*Un mundo raro*” refers to those that “lost” in love, alluding as well to the have-nots, the marginal and the poor. Against the backdrop of massive rural emigration to the urban nucleus of economic promise that was Mexico City, the thematic tone that emerges in the *ranchera* of the 1950s entailed an articulation and emotive ebullience closer to urban angst than rural imagery or pride. Jiménez’ words reach beyond the face value of the lyrics and touch a dual field of meaning: a sentiment associated with the underclass, the rejected, the spurned, as well as a sentiment associated with blame, particularly the blame of women.

The poetic and affective resonance of these songs led to their canonical status as anthems for the broken-hearted reeling with pathos: as Monsiváis imagines it, the singing subject “*vocifera su amor (a quien quiera oírlo y al que se haga disimulado), vitorea su desgracia y le echa porras al deseo de redimir, en puro olvido alcohólico, la mala suerte de esta pasión*” [articulates his love (whether to an attentive listener or someone that pretends not to listen), boasts his disgrace and encourages the desire to redeem, in alcoholic oblivion, his passion’s bad

luck] (*Amor Perdido*, 88). Jiménez' repertoire substantiates more than a private heartbroken consciousness. Even as he dressed in his *charro* costume in television performances or for photographic sessions, the folkloric visuality of his cultural production did not reflect the complexity of the sentiment developing simultaneously in his performance and in the greater social imaginary of urban migrants. Jiménez' songs were repositories, as well, for the subaltern to sing and to express their circumstances through the homogeneous lexicon of "passion" "loss" "disgrace".

Vargas adopts this repertoire of masculine defeat as part of her catalogue, conveying a different subject and wound, an expression inspired by the despair and hope of a queer Central American immigrant. She assumed the position of the spiteful singing subject and seized the masculine identified singing position. While many other women performed these songs of *despecho*, Vargas did so without resorting to a feminized image or sound, discarding the mariachi instrumentation, and maximizing the effect of "*el dolor de la trasnochada*" [late night pain] as she calls her style (2002, 130), through the singing voice accompanied by a guitar or two. Furthermore, Vargas found this *ranchera* of the afflicted professionally suitable in its affinity to her own experience: "*Por eso me convenía Jose Alfredo, porque había heredado 'el dolor del altiplano', porque expresaba como nadie el dolor común a todos los que aman, y yo me dejaba llevar por sus poesías, las maduraba en el corazón y cuando ahora salen en el escenario ya casi no son de José Alfredo, sino mías, porque yo les he anadido mi pena también*" [That's why [Jose Alfredo's repertoire] was convenient to me, because he inherited the 'pain of the highlands', because he expressed like no one else the pain of all who love, and I let myself go in his poetry, I matured [sic] them in my heart and when it emerges on stage [that poetry] is no longer Jose Alfredo's, but my own, because I have added my own sorrow"] (80).

Vargas here hints at a disidentificatory practice in her artistic development. Theoretician José Muñoz' notion is important to briefly rehearse here. Disidentification entails a strategy of survival that the minority subject engages in order to “negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continually elides and punishes” the subject that does not conform to normative standards (4). As I reviewed in the previous chapter, the *ranchera* commercial performance milieu was entrenched in heteronormative culture. Vargas recycles the *ranchera* in general, and Jiménez' songs in particular, as potent and alluring sites of regeneration from which to sound the overtones and resonance of a queer lament. If the *ranchera* lament is the cry of triumph of an afflicted masculinity, Vargas' strategy shifts the parameters of subjectivity that may access this “afflicted masculinity” and repositions the queer body in the platform of temporary audition and articulation of injury through *ranchera* cultural form.

Vargas' sartorial and the vocal strategies illustrate the disidentificatory value of her *ranchera* performance. Let us consider the latter first. In a gesture of visible rebellion, her choice to dress as a mestizo *campesino*, both on and off stage, did not represent a caricaturized effort (even as it might suggest it). Encouraged by writer and activist Judith de Van Beuren, the owner of the Mexico City cabaret bar *El Otro Refugio*, Vargas' signature wardrobe consisted of a mixture that appropriated clothing articles typical of the (male) *campesino*, the farmworker, and motifs that evoked sensibilities of the indigenous and the folk (two categories that were often conflated by *indigenista* politics): *manta* pants, white, loose blouses, *lorongos*, braided hair, and *guaraches*²⁰. According to Vargas, her selectivity was motivated by her desire to “place”

²⁰ Vargas' choice reflected the cultural nationalism known as *indigenismo* that thrived in Mexico from 1915 to 1940. *Indigenismo* was a discourse promoted by anthropologists and public intellectuals that validated indigenous communities, symbols and histories as part of the national

Mexican music back in its origins. She writes in her memoir that Mexican music had become “too commercial” and invested in “artificial” folk. Song (*ranchera*) technique, she continues, valued volume and clarity and disregarded what she considered crucial methods: the voice softly and sensuously dwelling in the sound of key lyrics and trailing breaths that extract the song’s emotional nuance. Her testimonial reads like a manifesto when she describes her notion of simple, elegant Mexican song performance:

Armada únicamente con mi guitarra, vestida como vestían las gentes del campo, sentada en el escenario como si alrededor de una hoguera estuviéramos, fumando un cigarillo como si la canción no tuviera otro fundamento que el dar salida a los dolores del alma, teniendo cerca el tequila como lo tienen las gentes campesinas que pasan las veladas nocturnas y aguardan el nuevo día...no era rebajar la

culture. This ideological tendency has since been highly critiqued; scholars have previously argued that *indigenismo* limited the political and social agency of indigenous communities by advocating for their incorporation into the national culture (See Dawson). I wish to locate Vargas’ decision, and Van Beuren’s enthusiastic suggestion, to dress “*vestida como visten las gentes del campo*” [like the campesinos] (Vargas 2002, 149) within the prerogatives of this period of *indigenismo*, as the nationalization of *lo indígena* led to the interchangeable use of “Indian” with the “folk”. This implies that while Vargas contested the hypermasculine folklore of the commercial *ranchera*, she engaged an ideological terrain valorized and objectified representations of the Indian. One must consider this in spite of the fact that Vargas performed in minor venues, with not major sponsors and without the support of a label for nearly a decade. Thus, while Vargas did not materially benefit nor did she wish to from her choice to exalt *lo indígena*, her choice was mired in the paternalistic politics of *indigenismo*.

música...era situarla donde verdaderamente le correspondia” [Equipped only with my guitar, dressed like the rural peoples, sitting on stage as if in front of a bonfire, smoking as if the song’s sole purpose was to allow the soul’s pain to emerge [from the body], having tequila close by as do peasants that await the arrival of the day...this was not denigrating music, this was situating it where it truly belonged] [my translation] (p. 149)

In this scenario, music belongs with *el pueblo*, the folk. Vargas’ mimicry was the spectacular result of its historical moment as well as her own conviction. The reception of her performance adds an important layer that complicates *indigenista* politics and ushers in two aspects of Vargas’ queering of *sentimiento*; the visual and vocal politics of its expression.

The appropriation of *campesino* attire by Vargas elicited animated reactions from spectators that oscillated between fascination and violence. Vargas recalls that her fame spread quickly soon after the public at large took note of the fact that she was the woman “that wore pants”. She was, after all, that *rara* (strange) singer, she emphasizes, a queerness that she also summoned off stage, often to aggressive responses and homophobic insults “*por vestir pantalones, por atrever[me] ...me gritaban marimacha por la calle* [they’d call out at me, dyke, in the street for daring to wear pants” (2010, 39).

Feminist theorist Judith Halberstam’s notion of female masculinities is helpful in framing the ideological repercussions of Vargas’ decision to queer the “folk”. Halberstam claims that “female masculinities are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity appear to be the real thing” (1). Vargas’ deployment of the *ranchera* through the articulation of a female masculinity undoes the very construction of the *ranchera* as a vehicle

of an indulgent and fallen virility as well as fantasies of the folk. When a similarly expressive and emotive *sentimiento* is deployed within a corporeal condition of a queer woman, an immigrant woman, the consequences are illuminating. In fulfilling her vision and performing the *ranchera*, this woman's rendition of "masculine" defeat made evident the artificiality of the masculinity/*ranchera* continuum, making her *sentimiento* an exhibition that suggests the making of a queer practice of the *ranchera* in the body of a migrant woman.

Vargas' "strangeness" also entailed the sound of her voice. Vargas' singing was not only amateur; she was repudiated by established, prestigious musicians as *rara*. She met celebrated figures of the time once she began work for National Lottery radio programming. Ignacio Fernández Esperón, also known as Tata Nacho, a respected folklorist, researcher of Mexican popular music, and singer-songwriter told Vargas her voice was "terrible" and advised her to renounce her ambitions (2002, 44). He was not the only one. What precisely was "ugly" about Vargas' voice at that time? Comments about Vargas' strange timbre allude to a lack of technical expertise, but these evaluations are omens of the discomfort a proposal like Vargas' could provoke. They point to a majoritarian fear of the queer triumph, of the fear that the gendered hegemonies transmitted through *ranchera sentimiento* be de-routed. Because there are no early recordings of this period (late 1930s to 1940s), one is prompted to ask: did the folklorist Fernández Esperón, a classically trained musician and intellectual with an interest in indigenous and popular musical practices, project his elite prejudices? Did Vargas' voice simply not inspire his feeling? As a scholar interested in popular song, Fernández Esperón was surely vigilant for "authentic" voices: how might have the sound of Vargas differed from his standards of beauty or desire for the "popular"?

I ask these questions not to legitimize Fernández Esperón's rejection, but to explore how his opinions are representative of a larger ideological repudiation, a policing of female sensuality in vocal performance of national genres. Moreover, one is prompted to imagine the imperfections of her voice, and I take the risk to connect the *rareza* Vargas discusses to the difficult reception of her voice. I suggest we read Fernández Esperón's comment, and Vargas' vivid memory of it, as a foreshadowing remark that hints at the sapphonic quality of Vargas' ability to perform not only a wide range of emotions but also to modulate a perplexing desire. A sapphonic voice, according to Elizabeth Wood, is a voice that constructs a sonorous world that stimulates the communion of lesbian relationships. The sapphonic voice, "powerful and problematic, defiant and defective," activates a mode of reception and emerges from the complex merging of habitually incompatible spaces and identities. Wood discusses this voice in terms of its continuous crossings and "cross-dressings", its "flexible negotiation and integration of an exceptional range of registers [that cross] boundaries among different vice types and their representations to challenge polarities of both gender and sexuality as the transgressive risks it takes act seductively on a lesbian listener..." (28). The sapphonic voice produces a "merging rather than splitting of 'butch' authority and 'femme' ambiguity, an acceptance and integration of male and female" (32). The voice here transmits the promise of belonging that, I contend, has to do with contesting the silence around *los raritos*, a diminutive form of "strange" meant to belittle and further invisibilize; with her suggestive vocals, Vargas makes sensuously perceptible what should be verbally sidestepped, what should be referenced only as a passing joke. The practice of her singing challenges the quietude concerning female queer sexuality, amplified by the microphone and by her calculated surges of emotional discharge.

Remarkably, Wood's conceptualization speaks directly to the theoretical foundations of the new mestiza in her insistence that this voice is a "synthesis" rather than a split; a dual consideration of both suggests how the new mestiza's voice constructs a crucial nexus where identities-in-difference become *audible* phenomena. Vargas queers *sentimiento* in cross-dressing the vocalization of defeat with sapphonic desire, cross-dresses the subject of masculine injury. Vargas' tender delivery of the *ranchera* contrasted with her visual aesthetics, her hair harshly pulled back, a look that she likens to a *jornalera indigena*, an indigenous migrant worker. Therefore, Vargas' *sentimiento* is produced from a location of sensuous ambiguity. The vocal chords' vibrations parallel the rhythms of sexual intimacy. A whisper is a bridge that connects the secret and the public, making the public secretive and secretive the public.

The *cantina* was a most influential space where Vargas' altering of structures of feeling first occurred—it was also the only available performance space for most of her early career. The 'bohemian' lifestyle of 1950s and '60s decades Mexico City had its nuclear center in the *cantinas* and their economies of illicit desire. *Cantinas* radiated a transformative aura (...*era como un escenario donde todo era posible, donde todo se hacía mas verdad...*). I would like to emphasize this phenomenology of the space where everything becomes "more truthful" and more vulnerable. The *cantina* is theorized by Sergio González Rodríguez as "a space intersected by the 'other' urban life, that of the collision between public vices and public dispersions. The *antro* [broadly, nightclub] registers the reverse of normal culture—it is the negative, or revealing mold, of the quotidian collective (27)." If we think about the *cantina* in terms of 'other' publics, we can begin to imagine that the singing and listening practices that Vargas encounters promote an aberrant sphere: cigarette smoke, bloodshot eyes, inebriation, altered consciousness. If the 'normal culture' resonates with 'normal singing', the ordinary ways of singing and established

gender technologies that made possible “to sing like a Mexican”, then it is no wonder that, for Vargas, the *cantina* demanded that the carefully choreographed *mexicanidad* be undone and instead yield a version that reflected the contradictory glamour and abjection of this space. Certainly, it is easy and tempting to romanticize the *cantina*, although Vargas hardly mentions but a taste of adversity in these spaces of utopic possibility (“*si me contrataban en una cantina, me costaba sudores que los clientes dejaran de gritar*” [if I was hired to sing in a *cantina*, it was a struggle to get the clients to stop screaming, 141]). To select this space was to imbibe its architecture, to learn how to speak in (the name of) its domain, and to tell its stories in the song. Vargas likens this space’s function to the confessional: “*Otro de los distintivos de aquellas cantinas era el ambiente de confesionario sentimental. Supongo que tendria su razon de ser en el tequila, el humo, las canciones tristes...* [Another distinctive trait of those cantinas was the sentimental confessional. I suppose that that reason was in the alcohol, in the smoke, in the songs” (139). Vargas accommodates in her voice, the multiple universes that exist in the forms of whispers, revelations, and rage for intimate failures.

Let us consider songs from her album “*Chavela Vargas con el Cuarteto Lara Foster*” [Vargas with the Lara Foster Quartet] (1961) as a way to trace these politics as expressed in her recorded voice. The Lara Foster quartet was agile in adapting songs of varied genres-- *ranchera*, Yucatecan trova, tangos, flamenco, milongas—into a mellifluous, romantic sound that simultaneously maintained the melodic integrity of the genre’s songs. This album reflects the trans-genre work of Vargas. I focus on her performance of *sentimiento* as evident in the *rancheras* transfused by the musicianship of both the players and of Vargas.

A stringed sequence of elaborate finger work initiates “*Un mundo raro*”; this is Vargas’ first documented interpretation of Jimenez’ song. The marking of the song as a *ranchera* is

evident in the vocal entrance. The song begins with a common *ranchera* aesthetic that Cándida Jáquez calls “time out of time” in which the music stops as the vocalist slowly enters the piece before the song resumes its initial musical tempo and meter. In this music-less bridge, each uttered syllable conveys not only the lyrics proper, but a sense of suspense that foretells the forthcoming emotive intensity and constitutes a most tender moment in the *ranchera* repertoire (171). The tactical use of the microphone enhanced the sapphonic signification of Vargas’ voice. She feeds into the microphone delicate, wispy singing in this moment of intense intimacy, as if the listener intrudes on a private exchange, “When they tell you about love and reverie...”. Continuing now with the guitars after the first a capella words, Vargas sings with a softness that connotes as much fragility as eroticism. Vargas employs a gentle prosody for much of the song, revealing the influence of vocal aesthetics associated with genres like the bolero or the *canCIÓN romantica*.

Especially careful with her vocalization, Vargas insists on attending to and interpreting the meaning of each letter, space and pause. Her interpretation is extraordinarily suggestive of erotic tenderness, her breathy timbre refreshing the pathos that this song evokes in the voice of Jiménez. Vargas’ tone of tenderness dominates, changing only during the chorus, a section where the speaker assures she will never admit that “our love doomed me”. In this moment of absolution and lyrical anger, Vargas’ voice conveys a self pity and pain, but one interlaced with carnal pleasure in the deft and daring revelation of what was kept mostly hidden throughout the song: her voice is raised and vibrates with either the ecstasy of romantic agony or, as literary theorist Yvonne Yarbro Bejarano might hear it, “lesbian desire and longing, sexual giving and taking, delight and suffering, seduction and rejection” (37). Vargas’ transfuses a lifeline of sensuality to a repertoire dominated by feelings that seemingly negate (carnal) pleasure, a

sapponics intersecting with the *ranchera*'s connotation of martyred *sentimiento*. The effect of confession facilitated by the microphone, and certainly a lack of visual representation of the song (music video, etc) during the 1960s, intensifies the minor noise of her mouth and encourages the imagination, the tongue twisting and transgressing. Another song, with greater dramatic contrasts, is *Paloma Negra*, produced with the same Quartet. In this *ranchera* by Tomás Mendez revived by singer Lila Downs in the 2000s, Vargas more prominently switches between the softness of resignation and the hysteria of desperation, between aurally depicting prayer and waiting only to shift to sounds of a ranging complaint, a rebuke to (the injustice of) being forgotten. Taking cues from her singing, not the text, I note how Vargas, in her interpretation (*authorizes*, in both senses of the word) the text to come into life.

The song “Manzanita”, Little Apple, is an example of the latter manifestation. In this Yucatecan trova song accompanied only with a guitar, and likely from the subject position of a male admirer, Vargas tenderly sings into the microphone. Her voice is as crisp as if it has been recorded with that grave murmur of seduction. Most of the song's course is a whispered, subtly glorious manifestation of desire to the *manzanita*, the feminized fruit, “which God/made Woman”. At times, Vargas' voice steadily rises and vibrates to declaration that the *manzanita* quenches the singer's thirst. The nearly four minutes of the song mimic sonically the act of arousal. The lips, tongue and teeth are powerfully suggestive in this song. Vargas maximizes the erotic imagery enacted in the song as well as the fluidity of sexuality that tensely circulates in the lyrics braided in the voice:

<i>Por lo fina y lo bonita</i>	Because my love perceives you
<i>por lo fresca y lo chiquita</i>	Fresh and small
<i>que mi cariño te ve</i>	fine and beautiful

eres una manzanita

You are a little apple

tan dulzona y exquisite

So sugared and exquisite

que te quisiera morder!

So ready for my bite

These recordings conform part of Vargas' early repertoire. Yet, a good deal of her available work is part of her late career, even as she chose to sing the same songs or adapt others to her particular style. How does aged female masculinity express *ranchera* feelings of affliction? Is the portrayal of feeling facilitated or obstructed? Does the aged body inhibit its power to convey resistance and transgression? The aging of Vargas' voice complicates the sapphonic delivery of emotion—the voice is obstructed at times. Because Vargas's voice is not technologically embellished, her efforts are doubly evident. The desire, exhaustion or spite is intensified in the voice that supersedes the obstacles to articulation.

I find it helpful to engage Edward Said's notion of 'late style', a term he borrows from philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, to elaborate on Vargas' own later performances. As he writes in this, his last work before his own death, Said discusses a canon of Western classical music, Beethoven; I simply expand the subject of inquiry into the terrain of popular culture and pay attention to gender in order to expand beyond Said's archive, written by male musicians and/or artists of classical repute. As Said re-considers it, 'late style' refers to an aesthetic developed during and directly related to an artist's advanced years. Moreover, Said specifically wishes to designate as 'late' a disquieting, nearly disruptive style, not in harmony with the expected vicissitudes of aging. That is, a rebellion against both ingrained cultural norms that presume tranquility in the older body. As he articulates it in a question, "what if age and ill health don't produce serenity and ripeness at all?" (page). That is, "late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality" (9). Moreover, in a musical case, (Said cites Beethoven's

classical work) the ‘grain’ of the voice is not just the body, but a body that should not be performing, that struggles, that clearly defies the capacities of an obstructed physicality.

This is particularly true in Vargas’ voice as she begins to sing. Consider her performance of her signature song “Macorina” in Carnegie Hall in 2003. This song opens the concert, a consistent choice throughout most of her late career. She has declared her flag, her anthem, and an affirmation for her love of women. Her vocal apparatus hesitates. She pushes nonetheless and does so with a recognizable pleasure, Deafening cheers accompany the sultry opening melody that repeats several times until we hear the first words by Vargas, “*Veinte años, y entre palmeras*”. Rather than sing, she declaims this preamble, as if it were a poem. The silence of the multitude overwhelms the space as she continues with the poetry that she transformed into her own song. These first words are uttered in a voice that speaks with some difficulty and hint at androgyny. A force between age and aesthetics decelerate her narration and singing. Her vocal apparatus drags her pronunciation, provoking the sense that time melts into the moment as she creates the scenario of ‘Macorina’ with her own voice and with the minimal company of two guitars. The intonation of the phrasing creates a pattern that makes one verse’s volume fall and the next one rise.

For example, she exclaims “*veinte años*” in a loud, gradual tone that mimics an old body walking. She would seem to open her mouth fully upon saying the syllable of “*años*”, creating the sensation of a slow motion song. The following “*y entre palmeras*” descends unhurriedly in volume and suggests a smile, the voice teasing in the idea of erotic pleasure. Her voice does struggle at times, making the song hesitant, as if she tries to catch her breath, as if she might not be saying the right word: “*los cuerpos, como banderas/noche, guateque y danzón/ la orquesta tocaba un son de selva ardiente y caprina/ l a luna un gran frenesí...*” Words are

separated; “la” becomes two separate sounds. She achieves a performance of forgetfulness, of hesitancy, a deliberate aesthetic that surprises when she does finally mention the chorus: “*Ponme la mano --ui Macorina, P-nm l- m-n- aquí.*” In a gesture that surprises with its sensuality, and is blended with her laborious pronunciation, she skips vowels in order to articulate desire. The audience constantly interacts, and in this version of “Macorina”, they intermittently shout. They squeal. They enhance the hedonism and sultry sounds emanating from Vargas. This example presents common sounds and pauses that are represented throughout the concert and are typical of her late career. These always change in each interpretation, but suggest the possibilities of her performance. She speaks slowly, declaiming with a seriousness that borders on performances of camp and mysticism. Some words’ first letters are extended, suggesting a labor in utterance: not simply ‘noche’, but “Nnnhhhhhh oche” the entire body, or the timbre corporeal, manifesting from her octogenerian body. More than suggesting a technique, Vargas’s ‘late singing’ constitutes the manifestation of an aged corporeality, the “sustained by a level of tension that evokes the exhausted efforts of advanced age and intercourse²¹. At the closing of the song with the line of the chorus, her muffled mouth, “p---n—mme la mano--”, pauses for a few seconds before the final rush of energy, “AQUI”, referencing erogenous zones, “put your hand...HERE”.

²¹ Musicologist Nina Eidsheim’s notion of timbre corporeal assists in my listening of Vargas’ voice with particular attention to the body. Eidsheim contends that, while timbre has been largely read as a sonic phenomenon, “vocal timbre must be recognized *not only as aural but also as corporeal*. From this I will suggest that the connection between *the logics, structure and textures of inner life* and *timbre* is to be found in the *timbre corporeal*”(italics in original, 253).

Clearly, Vargas' aged saphonic voice continued to attract attention, given that her late stage career was a relatively successful endeavor. Her sound became increasingly wedded to a Mexican resonance during this period, no doubt to facilitated circulation of music globally. *Sentimiento*, in this instance, becomes a representative spectacle and an ethnically marked possession and commodity: it is both naturalized and prized. The following section examines the politics of Vargas' saphonic *sentimiento* as a celebrated *and* domesticated intercultural act in Spain and later in New York.

Success in Spain: Intercultural Performance

Chavela Vargas' reappearance as a singer initiated at the famed Mexico City cabaret-bar "El Habito," and she flourished internationally once she left for Europe at the behest of a Spanish impresario. Beginning in the early 1990s, a revitalized Vargas in her 70s recovers her previous repertoire, including the *ranchera* lament. Vargas' aged and performing corporeality, and the histories of transgression invoked in her performance, inspire a transaction between the singer, publics and media that engages a millennial fascination with the Other. The extraordinary feeling that Vargas becomes wedded to by Spanish audiences and critics, I contend, produces a way of exoticization that is not unrelated to legacies of colonialism. The discourse of praise for emotivity may be present in her earlier work, but the enthusiasm for her later productions is embroiled in the transcultural encounter.²²

²² The metaphor developed by Vargas herself regarding her relationship with the Spanish is telling. She has previously referenced her experiences in Spain as encompassing a love affair, signaling that country as female. This analogy has been appropriated by (name of author), calling

I link the praise and admiration for Vargas to the other history of intercultural performance, to borrow from Coco Fusco's influential term. I read Vargas' *sentimiento* as an artistic form consumed according to pre-established notions of an extraordinary Otherness. According to Fusco, intercultural performance was a complementary practice for the campaign of colonialism and extends the five hundred year history of conquest, cultural pillage, and empire building. Through the centuries, aboriginal "samples" from around the world were displayed in Europe for aesthetic contemplation, entertainment and scientific analysis. While the acts of exhibition justified Western moral and physical superiority, they also "perpetrated the illusion of authenticity in order to cater to the Western fascination with Otherness" (147).

The course of events that led to Vargas' career "revival" are eerily similar to the abject practice of intercultural performance. The manner in which Vargas traveled to Europe, and played to sold out concerts for the first time with the sponsorship of numerous celebrities, was prompted by her singular emotional expression and was awarded with the Isabel la Católica prize²³ that attests to the benevolent vestiges of European expositions of the Other from the

it a 'queer love affair' in her essay. Spain becomes the female lover ("*Espana la hembra, Mexico el macho*", 130) and their "very queer love affair", a mutual wooing.

²³ The Order of Isabel la Católica was founded in 1815 in order to reward individuals loyalty to Spain, to recognize the contributions of national or foreign citizens to the betterment of the country, and to acknowledge extraordinary efforts toward the "prosperity" of American and overseas territories. President Jose Maria Aznar presided Vargas' brief ceremony in 2000. In his speech, the president highlighted that the award was a sign of gratitude to "someone that represents a live and magnificent symbol of what it means to think and express oneself in the Spanish language" (Aznar). Aznar additionally remarks vaguely that Vargas' songs are

Americas. Clearly, Vargas voluntarily and enthusiastically participated in her successful tour of Spain—the conditions of her travel radically differ from the overt racism experienced by women, men and children as recently as 1992. Yet, as Fusco reminds us, “While the human exhibition exists in more benign terms today...the desire to look upon predictable forms of otherness from a safe distance persists” (154). I assert that the particular quality for which Vargas was admired was not an “unusual” trait in her physique or attire, as was customary before, but her presumably intense and authentic feeling devoid of artifice—her “authentic” *sentimiento* becomes a morally superior quality, and “difference” is transplanted into the lexicon of emotion. Vargas’ performances of the past decade provide an interesting case study in the recurrence of encounters that unfold along a historical route (Spain-Americas, Center-Margin) that recalls the commodification and consumption of raw materials.

I argue that Vargas’ diasporic performances in Europe of the wistful *ranchera* mobilize and harness a longing for “authentic” expressivity. The impossible notion of authenticity is nevertheless bound in the Spanish reception of Vargas to racialized expectations of simple and pure, an expressivity that has to be flown out of the country where it originates in order to be appreciated. Indeed, the desire to see and listen to Vargas’ *sentimiento* and to consume her cultural production develops within a globalized musical context that reveals the role of affect in perpetuating the listener’s “gaze”. Vargas’ voice transforms into a source of uniquely raw emotions celebrated by prominent political and artistic figure; their praise warmly welcomes and subtly exoticizes Vargas. My examination of her performance in (physical) senescence reveals

“hopeful” and “unite” generations. Given the merits and actions that this prize endorses, this tribute to Vargas on behalf of the Spanish government and royalty are performed with subtle language underlined with histories of Empire.

how the mechanisms of globalization may effectively promote an elision of transgressive histories²⁴. The line between admiration and abjection, between granting legitimacy and reiterating *rareza* is a thin one. This thin line is illustrated by Almodóvar's celebrated phrase inspired by Vargas' movements on stage, wearing her poncho and extending her arms in gratitude, "No one, except Christ, can open their arms like Chavela".

After spending over a decade in virtual public retirement, Vargas re-appeared in 1991 at the age of 72, singing in *El Hábito* in Mexico City. An audience member, Manuel Arroyo (her eventual promoter) attended her presentations consistently, asking time after time for the song "Las Ciudades". Arroyo's musical requests were soon followed by a serious work proposal for Vargas, asking her, indeed, gently insisting, that she consider touring Spain.²⁵ Her affirmative decision was a fateful one.

²⁴ Vargas' success in Spain coincided with the first time she publicly came out as a lesbian in the year 2000, before the publication of her memoirs. Her declaration was significant even if it was an "obvious" fact. As queer theorist Sofía Ruiz-Alfaro has noted, Spanish society virtually ignored Vargas' comment, despite the fact that the country was mired in a public debate of same sex marriages (15). I agree with Ruiz-Alfaro that the dominant narratives about Vargas' persona neutralized her coming out. I expand on Ruiz-Alfaro's argument by focusing on how narratives of Vargas' queer, sapphonic resonance or of her coming out narrative are inhibited by the very manner in which she is received. The sensationalist details of a troubled past and the trope of resurrection and discovery are largely favored for this "extraordinary other".

²⁵ In a biographical documentary on Chavela Vargas, which interviews several of her friends and colleagues, Manuel Arroyo mentions he often gets asked why he decided to embark on the "adventure" of bringing Vargas to Spain: "the truth is I did it for purely selfish reasons. I thought

Spanish audiences presumably found in Vargas another way of saying and feeling. Manuel Arroyo, who suggested to Vargas that she tour Spain, notes in an interview that “[Spanish] youth did not know things could be said in a different way, in such a moving way”. A *Chavelazo* (Chavelamania) in that country ensued. Chavelamania: the word itself evokes a material and maniac obsession with a fascinating object. With the help of Arroyo, and the positive promotion by a powerful cohort of admirers (Joaquín Sabina and Pedro Almodóvar included), concerts in Madrid, Sevilla, Barcelona, and other cities quickly sold out. According to Vargas, her concerts in Spain were her first time in a concert stage, singing for an audience that was there, not to have a drink, but to listen to her (Vargas 2010, 105). The riveting clamor around her success conceals an easily overlooked point. Such tours comprised her ‘first time’ on a concert stage, transforming her performance of feeling as an isolated endeavor that transpired in silent awe; this point further clarifies my argument that histories of intercultural performance are evoked in this aspect of Vargas’ career. Her presentations were sold out events, and thus highly lucrative spectacles; seats were exclusively for the enjoyment of an illuminated figure on the proscenium. That is, the rules and codes that largely governed her live presentations in her earlier career are transformed in the context of the Spanish stage. This is not to say the concerts are fully hushed: they applaud in the *bulería* fashion, often at the end of her concerts.

In the midst of this artistic success, a constant reference in the discourse surrounding Vargas’ public persona is emotional mastery over her audience. Vargas is the affective center of her concerts and an emotional force that drives others to “feel”. Of her ability to portray

that for me, it would be a great personal satisfaction to see Chavela triumph in Spain.” He became Vargas’ manager in Spain. His words betray an admiration for Vargas, admiration that bears a friendship fraught with uneven power.

contrasting fervencies, Sabina has declared, “*quien pudiera reír, como llora Chavela Vargas!* [who could laugh, as Chavela Vargas cries!]”, lyrics that pertain to a song that pays tribute to the “dame of the red poncho”. During her concerts, as Maria Cortina²⁶ likes to note, audiences pay tribute with standing ovations, genuflections, applause, but more than anything tears flow. The presence of tears during her presentations is noted in newspaper articles and anecdotes. Cortina further elaborates on this point: “ ‘*En España llora todo el mundo*’ me dijo Chavela una tarde...*Llora todo el mundo cuando la escuchan cantar...pero el que más llora es Pedro Almodóvar* [In Spain everyone cries, Chavela told me. Everyone cries when she sings, but who cries most is Almodóvar]” (107).

The film director’s relationship with Vargas is of particular interest here, for it was he who became a personal escort of hers upon her arrival in Spain. Just as he accompanied Vargas throughout Spain and other places in Europe, Almodóvar is credited with bringing back into the limelight the work of singers, at least two of them women performers from the Americas, by employing their music in the soundtrack of his films (*Reforma* 1997). One of these women was La Lupe; the other, Vargas. Additionally, he has claimed that Edith Piaf, Bola de Nieve, and Vargas have the most dramatic voices of the twentieth century, an opinion that clusters around figures that evoke emotional exoticism and fascination²⁷. Such a posture conflates gender with

²⁶ Cortina is the co-author of Vargas’ latest biography, *Las Verdades de Chavela* (2010).

²⁷ These artists are a few of several others Almodovar has praised due to their emotive singularities. He has recently professionally supported one of Spain’s up and coming singers, Concha Buika, the daughter of Equatorial Guinean parents. In her most recent album, *El Ultimo Trago* (2009), itself a tribute to Vargas, Almodovar writes in the liner notes: “Since the very first time, listening to Buika awakened a commotion within me, a mixture of intensity, emotion and

drama, drama with abjection. By mixing them, these conditions and practices are favorable for the production of exceptional sentiment. In an interview to the magazine *Reforma*, Almodóvar acknowledges his mediating position between performers like Vargas and their success. I quote a passage that provides a crucial set of contrasts:

La verdad es que he sido como un medio para que se produzca ese reconocimiento, sobre todo con una mujer como la Lupe...Es como si me hubiera elegido para ello...No es que me sienta descubridor de nadie, me veo más como un medio transmisor. En el caso de Chavela estaba totalmente olvidada, la gente tenía muy malos recuerdos de ella. Dicen que llegó incluso a disparar desde un escenario a un espectador...Pero era una injusticia que no se le diera una nueva oportunidad en México, era como una proscrita. Chavela casi comenzó desde cero aquí, en un local de Madrid, volvió a México y la gente no se lo creía...Tuvo que ir al Teatro Olympia de París para que la tomaran en cuenta. Participar, aunque sea mínimamente, en la trayectoria de mujeres así me emociona mucho". [The truth is that I've been a sort of medium in the making of that recognition, above all to women like la Lupe...it is as if I were chosen by her to do it...It's not that I feel like the discoverer, I see myself more like a medium of transmission. In the case of Chavela, she was completely

wetness; a reaction close to the one Chavela Vargas inspires in me. Chavela Vargas and Concha Buika belong to a lineage of singers that is now extinct". His comments, a well deserved homage no doubt, reiterate similar politics of praise. Buika, as she is largely known, will star in Almodóvar's upcoming film, *La Piel que Habito* (2011), not in terms of soundtrack, but as an actress.

forgotten, people had very bad memories of her. It is said that she even shot a spectator from the stage [the first time Vargas visited Spain, in the late '70s]...But it was an injustice that she didn't have a new opportunity in Mexico, she was in a sort of exile...Chavela practically began from zero here, at a venue in Madrid, she returned to Mexico and people couldn't believe it...She had to go to the Olympia in Paris so that she could be accepted at home. To have a role, even if it's a minimal one, in the trajectory of women like them moves me.]

Almodóvar claims to serve multiple purposes: a mediating figure that helps others navigate the markets and audiences of Europe and a vindicating friend that bestows justice where there once was oblivion. Could this scenario be a variation of a historical constant? Two points from this quote make intriguing suggestions about the politics of *sentimiento*, particularly forms that, upon their exportation, become commodity items. The first is the notion of “discovery” of, or at least mediation for, dramatic talent. Although Almodóvar is aligned with Vargas, Bola de Nieve, and La Lupe in terms of their queerness, theirs is a relationship with differences in power. This is not to say that Vargas does not benefit greatly from Almodóvar's support. There remains, however, the insinuation of ‘returning’ to culture, as Vargas travels to Europe, steps on a concert stage for the first time (and engages in activity opposite that of *pachanga*, loosely, party) and is legitimated for the world by performing in a world-renown Parisian site. The social network that sponsors, so to speak, Vargas' performances in Spain is comprised of an elite group of socialites,

artists and politicians that fawn over Vargas in private parties, concerts and public ceremonies²⁸.

Regarding Vargas' audible appearance in Almodóvar's films, I would like to cite some of Raquel Medina Bañón's insights from her essay "*El reencuentro de la música Española con la latinoamerica poscolonial: el caso Joaquín Sabina*", in order to formulate propositions of my own regarding the exoticization of Vargas' performance of feeling. In his film *La Flor de mi Secreto* (1995), Almodóvar first incorporated Vargas into the soundtrack using her song "El último trago", a Jiménez *ranchera*. In this film, Almodóvar features Vargas in a "performance-within-a-performance" diegetic mode. Mourning the betrayal of her husband, Locadia, the protagonist and successful writer of romance novels, finds herself walking in the streets of Madrid and enters a café. While Locadia quietly weeps at the bar, the camera turns to the small television of the establishment, where a performance by Chavela Vargas transpires. She sings dressed in her typical late career ensemble: her *jorongo*, her short hair, her song accompanied by two guitarists. The lyrics of lament, self-effacement, forgetting, and farewell stir an already shaken Locadia; she pants and looks behind her dark sunglasses slowly up at the screen, where Vargas extends her arms and flails an accusatory finger at the abandoning lover. The lyrics speak directly at Locadia's experience. Vargas's performance is powerful enough to break through Locadia's emotional front. The writer takes off her sunglasses and dries her tears. The song alters

²⁸ In an interview with Jesusa Rodríguez, Vargas explains the social atmosphere in her arrival to Spain: "I am of the people, I am not royalty. It's been a coincidence that I mingle with them...they see me as a strange animal...", to which Rodríguez interrupts, "that's what I wanted to ask you, do you feel upon entering the world of Almodóvar in Spain, is there a bit of snobbishness there, that you're a sort of myth?" Yes, Vargas replies, "I was the black legend, the black legend has arrived" (Palacios).

the quotidian ambience of the café. Vargas' performance adds a taste of nocturnal lament and temporal deceleration to the scene, which transpires in the midst of midday bustle. Vargas's filmic intertext provides an ephemerality and ghostly comment; her voice transports to "another" time and place and is compatible with the notion of the "timeless" feeling.

The choice to insert such voices, in Vargas' case, a passionate sound that exemplifies 20th century drama, into the soundtrack of the film "presumes an extraordinary cultural appropriation". This confiscation ironically follows Almodóvar's wish to reclaim the bolero (genre that Vargas sings in another of his movies) in order to queer its cultural symbolism steeped in patriarchy. Vargas and Almodóvar challenge, in their own respective works juxtaposed into the cinematic event, the affective politics of gender that exist within a broad Hispanic world. Seen in this way, Almodóvar's gesture is a richly layered one, precisely re-reading Vargas' transgression and inserting it as a critical intertext in his films. Yet, a tension remains. In the larger context of a Spanish 'revival' of Vargas, such use of songs are complicit with an awkward re-encounter of postcolonial tinges in general that renders Vargas a nostalgic relic of Mexico City's bohemian atmosphere.

Almodóvar's influence in cultural and artistic circles aided in the "return" to and "recognition" in Spain of Vargas not only in Spain, but also in Europe. The timing of such a "revival" is a haunting coincidence: it was the year 1992 when Vargas debuted in the theaters of Madrid, the quincentennial of the discovery of the Americas. I do not seek to simply equate Vargas' talent with raw material. One must not forget that the celebratory atmosphere created in welcoming Vargas into the entertainment industry of Spain is part of a larger cultural and economic context. She was not the only Latin American cultural figure making headlines in Spain in the early 1990s. During that decade, intellectuals and artists such as writers Zoe Valdez

and Mario Vargas Llosa, singers Celia Cruz and Pablo Milanés were in some degree or another honored. Medina Bañón, who designates that these artists are ushered in with a “spectacular and assimilationist” gesture, observes the backdrop of these deeds: the increasing marginality and violence against immigrant groups from the Americas and North Africa at large (70). The geopolitical context of Vargas’ work in *la madre patria* illuminates the discussion of ‘extraordinary feeling’ as sustaining a tension between the commodity and cult stature of her voice and a forgotten queering of her *sentimiento*. The making and reception of Vargas’ *sentimiento* in the early 2000s in New York steadfastly reflects a historical moment of “Latino Boom”. This section builds upon my previous explorations of how Vargas’ *sentimiento* contributes to epistemologies of gender, sexuality, and exoticized affect by analyzing how the performance of emotion is entwined with the commodification of *latinidad* in the United States.

A Latina Aural Icon at Carnegie Hall

Chavela Vargas’ 2006 New York performance was, indeed, a rare event. With the symbolic aid of Latino celebrity figures, Vargas stepped on the cosmopolitan stage in New York to sing for a diverse audience, including a great number of Latinos. The Carnegie Hall scenario elucidates how *sentimiento* is read and experienced as an embodied, aural and affective manifestation of *latinidad* through the mythologized figure of Vargas. By focusing on a distinct historical moment and geographic space, I wish to read how Vargas’ ritual-like Carnegie concert’s reception in particular attests to the making of a Latina aural myth. The media’s portrayal of Vargas domesticates her history and by claims her voice as “personally expressive” at the same she epitomizes, to both listeners and critics, a Latino collectivity.

I find it crucial to first situate the historic context of the concert, particularly as my reading of Vargas' performance as an expression of *latinidad* and not *mexicanidad* may seem polemical. Her concert transpired roughly a year after her brief cameo in the film *Frida*, a production whose success is linked to the so-called "Latino Boom" of the 1990s. During that last decade of the 20th century, a "Latin explosion" developed in culture and media. American corporations discerned the lucrative potential in catering to the Latino community. Marketing ploys involving media publishing industry and entertainment were accompanied by an increasingly virulent nativist discourse. Thus, Latinos in the 1990s figured in public discourse as both a commodity and a threat. The gendered physical and social body, in particular, had a primordial and contested role in galvanizing debates around *latinidad*.

Performance theorist Deborah Paredez explores how dead Latina bodies were often "celebrated and sometimes reviled by a range of communities throughout the 1990s to facilitate emerging and often competing articulations of *latinidad*, or Latina/o identity...the Latina tomb was regularly raided to promote, to contain, and often to capitalize on the cultural, economic and political Latin Boom in the United States" (7). Paredez cites Frida Kahlo and Eva Peron as exemplary cases, and elaborates further on the celebrated and contested afterlife of slain singer Selena. My intention is not to simply claim that Vargas belongs in this or any other mythical pantheon representative of the Latina/o boom in the United States. Vargas does not re-launch a career or begin an extended tour of the United States, but her brief appearance in *Frida*, her historic Carnegie Hall concert, and the attention she garnered for both productions are partly the result of the mainstreaming of *latinidad*. Moreover, Vargas' act is somewhat appropriated by the concert sponsors as the exhibition of Latina/o heritage, and her *sentimiento* can thus be experienced as the transmission of not only Mexican but Latino histories. Focusing on Vargas

complicates the common representative tropes of *latinidad*: the exotic appeal is rerouted from her unembellished and aged body to her voice. In addition, her queerness interrupts the heteronormative narrative that most Latino heritage icons are inscribed into. This combination of the voice and of queerness reveals an unlikely Latina aural icon, and a fresh way to discern how her effusive performances are entwined with *latinidad* as an affective mode (Muñoz). *Sentimiento* is the result of her biography and the biography of emotional *latinidad*.

An introduction by Elliot Goldenthal, composer of the score for the film *Frida*, and Salma Hayek, who portrays the iconic artist, welcome and praise Vargas. Their remarks exemplify two conditions related to Vargas' history: gendered rebellion and "timeless" Mexican feeling. In his remarks, Goldenthal describes a dream he had, in which he met "an Angel, or a Devil, who sang the most heavenly and devily (sic) songs", while he cried "tears of joy or sadness". A bottle of tequila rested beside this Angel-Devil, he continues, as did a pistol and a poem. Beneath the mystic figure, roots extended into the Manhattan ground that continued all the way to Mexico. Already the notion of Vargas, recounted in ludic fashion, embodies a quizzical figure difficult to categorize in its strangeness and androgyny. The Black Legend of her past is also referenced in noting the pistol and the bottle. Hayek's introduction is marked by a more solemn tone. Delivered in Spanish, she pays homage to a Vargas that "transforms herself into song", embodying the music and reminding her listeners that "we are a special people...of courage, survival, indestructible spirit". She continues to note that today a "different Chavela", one that, she describes as of love and peace, is there with them. Before closing, she names Vargas the "Billie Holiday" of Latinos.

These comments seek to re-introduce "La Vargas" as a performer deeply rooted in Mexican musical history. The weight of her tradition is balanced by her mobility within venues

of global urban centers. And her ability to elicit tears from the audience, to move them while she impeccably sings, is presented as a warning of sorts, as a phenomenon to anticipate. Vargas, who so often represented the inverse of a “people’s” icon, was now the embodiment of a people’s essence, as she had overcome the destructiveness of her alcohol, and deservedly occupied a space next to other “universally” appreciated singers.

Vargas appears shortly after this introduction, while deafening clamor unleashes from the adoring crowd, draped in a red *jorongo* with a long sleeve black shirt underneath. Her coiffed, waved short hair is silver gray. Such style, inspired by the simple wardrobe of the Mexican *campesino* that, in Carnegie Hall, transforms itself into a mythical article on celebrated display, recalls just what made her a paragon of gendered rebellion at the outset of her career. Now age slows her somewhat.

Her concert did not go unnoticed by the local media. A *New York Times* article by Mireya Navarro provided an overview of Vargas’ career. The piece briefly recounted Vargas’ past, taking note of the scandals and love affairs she experienced as a younger singer in Mexico. Besides describing her as a former “rebel known for shocking behavior”, the note adds details about her “wild” past, alluding to her so-called Black Legend: “Ms. Vargas...flouted convention in the 1940s and 50s by carrying a gun and wearing men’s trousers.” Mutedly suggesting the sound of her younger voice, the article acknowledges the quality of her current singing, indicating her aged timbre is, “unadorned, passionate and with a fractured flow...[it] has become more serene and low-pitched”, a reference that associates maturity with tranquility as well as the

older woman's voice closer to a masculine sound (low-pitched)²⁹. Vargas is detached from a former self that presumably would be incompatible with her current bodily condition.

The article presents two key issues regarding the voice and its expression that suggest a politics of gender and feeling in Vargas' performance of *sentimiento*. The first is the inability to separate singing from subjectivity, voice from biography. The second is discussing *sentimiento* as a display of emotional mastery that few possess, an exotic commodity of sorts. The writing proffers, as so many journalistic or scholarly efforts, a particular epistemology of voice that links biography to singing. Just as Vargas is compared to Billie Holiday, and just as Holiday is often simply seen as a tragic figure whose singing transmitted personal travails, Vargas is similarly positioned as conveying personal truths. Although Vargas is at the Carnegie concert a "different" (redeemed) singer, her turbulent past just a memory, the positive correlation between Vargas' timbre and her life circumstances continue. That is, her singing is explosive during her turbulent first years as a singer, while her senescent sound is due to her old age. Moreover, it would seem that her contemporary singing is less transgressively carnal as it is mystical, atoning for the otherwise objectionable voice.

In the early years of her career, the article notes, Vargas would "dress like a man, carry a gun, seduce women", an oft-repeated litany. Such descriptions recall the discussions around her initial performances in Mexico City, when spectators, as she notes in her *testimonio* (memoir),

²⁹ These readings continue to disseminate in the journalistic domain. A recent article about Vargas on National Public Radio noted her timeless appeal and her voice, "tailored-made for singing *rancheras*" (Contreras), songs that proffer a show akin to "miniature operas" with their dramatic narratives compressed to the time of a few minutes. Vargas' feeling capacity is tied to her vocal ability.

where intrigued more by her “pants” than by her voice, arriving at shows with great anticipation to see a woman with “well-trimmed pants”. The early phase of her performance life opposes her present activities as a singer. These two periods are separated by a schism of nearly forty years, when Vargas retired due to illness. Her life and her voice are necessarily bridged, and this relationship presents us with a particular example of how the need to invoke a troubled biography is a requisite to mythologize a voice.

This bridging is not a unique case here. Descriptions of the singing voices of popular musical artists typically resort to a ‘mythologized biography’ of the singer to account for the effect, mystique and allure of timbre. For example, investigations of the voices of Billie Holiday and Lucha Reyes tend to explain their voices by evoking alcoholic imagery or failed personal relationships. The communicative virtuosity of Vargas can be misunderstood, as well, as the inevitable result of her childhood experiences, a ‘bohemian’ lifestyle and alcoholism. The popular (pop music) voice, particularly when this voice is perceived as damaged, decayed, and thus somewhat more accessible, can become a derivative of biography or even cultural stereotype, its sound the distillation of a supposed personal essence.

The belief that fuses the popular singing vocal expression with biography, according to Simon Frith, pervades due to listening practices that hear singers in the ‘pop’ genre as “personally expressive” (186). This pervasive impression is particularly applied to women performers, a point that is not explicit in his discussion of how the expressive abilities of the “pop” voice are explained in terms of the reception of the performer’s voice, and thus the conditions of their corporeality. As examples, Frith turns to Maria Callas’ work. Quoting Wayne Koestenbaum, Frith elaborates on the dichotomy of art/nature constructed around Callas’ performances. This dichotomy involves a ‘before and after’ scenario based on the state of her

health. The flawless, “grainless”, one could surmise recalling Barthes, voice is later defeated by the body, when disease and age mark it as “damaged”, and, according to the ‘personally expressive’ notion, more accessible, more ‘pop’. To believe that there is a performance vs. a ‘true’ identity implies that any technical imperfection reveals the genuine person. While Vargas was never hailed for having a technically immaculate voice, the color of her timbre is hailed for its imperfection, which seemingly suited her difficult life. While Frith does acknowledge the voice as a critical site of gender construction, how can a feminist reading of the ‘personally expressive’ be considered, with vigilance, in a genre saturated with national, collective signification? How can we intersect it with matters of gender and the nation?

The reading of Holiday and Callas as somehow ‘personally expressive’ links them with Vargas in other ways: all gendered, skilled singers that yield fantasies suspiciously related to speculations about the alluring, unknown other. This exotic ‘other’ is hyper audible in discourse, often exceptionally expressive, and frequently framed within a tragic narrative. How might such an intersected concern with voice production help us understand Vargas’ performance and moreover, the notion of *sentimiento*? Particularly when *sentimiento* is not only a phenomenon that conveys certain elements of the “personally expressive” but also of the “collectively shared”?

The second is the general description of Vargas’ singing as mythical, as possessing extraordinary feeling, even beyond the presumable limits of an already passionate musical tradition under which she is often categorized. Likewise, the scorer of the film, composer Elliot Goldenthal, enthused about Vargas’ dramatic wherewithal: “We’re very lucky when we get to see [an]...artist who has the ability to touch the thousands of colors of emotion, ranging from the most joyous to the most rebellious to the most erotic to the most painful...she does it with

disarming purity, right to the bone” (Navarro). Likewise, concertgoer Trina Trujillo avidly declared, “[Vargas] personifies sincerity and courage...she transmits everything, and you are lost in time”.³⁰ Indeed, that night, Vargas, introduced by Goldenthal and Hayek, engaged the audience with vocal abilities that have been identified as exceptional. The article cites a significant quote that further situates the relationship between gender and her interpretations of *rancheras* as one that transformed the genre: she feels the music, she projects sincerity, and a “woman’s fierceness” (qtd. in Navarro).

In a scene from the U.S. made film *Frida* (2002), Vargas sings in a dark *cantina* full of smoke that echo their swirls in the mirrored space. Draped in a gray-black *rebozo* that covers her

³⁰ It behooves us to recall Yarbro-Bejarano’s analysis of Vargas’ vocal iconoclasm: “extreme contrasts in tempo and volume and the artful manipulation of the whole range of the human voice: whispers, cries, growls, laughs, shouts and murmurs of desire” (41). That Yarbro-Bejarano and Goldenthal’s description of Vargas’ voice, introduced at the outset of this chapter, are nearly identical in describing the “range of the human voice” and “range of emotions”, is not surprising. However, we must take note that both comments underpin divergent motivations, and promote a different politics regarding *sentimiento*. Goldenthal praises Vargas’ virtuosity, and likens it to the talent of singers Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf. *Sentimiento*, in this way, is an elite talent that can be universally appreciated and consumed. Vargas makes audible the human condition—an ironic triumph for a “*rareza*”. Like the other artists mentioned, Vargas would seem a member of a woman’s cult whose price for ‘universality’ is set high. Comments like Goldenthal’s presume transcendence while crediting talent, a praising moment that necessarily homogenizes the sentiment, and reception, that Vargas inspires.

silver hair, the camera shows her backside, a solitary woman hunched, sitting. She, personifying death, dryly sings “La Llorona” a capella, with an imposing voice, half speaking, half wailing. When Frida (Salma Hayek) joins the mysterious woman, the camera allows us to see as she uncovers her aged, androgynous visage. Vargas pours tequila into a glass for a stoically mesmerized Hayek, who tearfully looks and listens to this *Llorona*. Her brief cameo reveals several of the themes analyzed in this chapter in the order they were covered: the scene introduces a whiff of memory of Vargas’ transgressive vocal and bodily presence, a singularity that she evidently masters as she gloriously demonstrates by powerfully evoking the transcendental with authority, with *sentimiento*. Moreover, her use in this film confirms the heightened profile Vargas in her late career, and her portrayal of *la Llorona* encapsulates a metaphor: she appropriately fits the image of the mythical *mexicana* and exquisitely materializes sounds that code ancestral emotions. Cast as the deathly exotic woman, she also provides cultural capital to the film as the legendary singer and former lover of Kahlo. The film illustrates the cultural politics of *sentimiento* in the transnational imaginary and the tropes that persists in its embodiment. In addition to re-introducing Vargas to a wide audience, *Frida* also cast a then largely unknown singer whose talent is undeniably showcased in the film: Lila Downs.

CHAPTER FOUR

A MESTIZA' TRANSBORDER TRIBUTE

Wearing a pair of dark sunglasses inside the City Theater in Mexico City, replete with adoring fans, 90-year old Chavela Vargas sits in a wheelchair that supports her tired body on stage. The year is 2009. A black, red and white *lorongo* cushions her in the seat that signals her dominion as well as her disability. She is not there to sing, nor is she alone on the platform, decorated with similar colors as her *lorongo*. No. Accompanied by Carlos Monsiváis, who sits on a couch, Vargas watches as several colleagues pay her tribute. Singer Songwriter Lila Downs participates, strikingly frocked with a topaz *rebozo*, thickly beaded crimson necklaces, violet ribbons entwined in her braids, canary and cardinal feathers flowing as earrings; no different from her usual stage attire. “For the ailments of the body”, Downs declares before singing, “we have doctors. For the ailments of the head, [we have] confession. But, for the maladies of the heart and of the soul... *doña Chavela Vargas*”. She whispers these last few words while she points toward a smiling Vargas. Although nearly unintelligible, the message is clear to the audiences, whose members applaud and cheer in agreement. Downs begins to sing “Paloma Negra”, one of the nonagenarian’s most well known songs. A singer in her own right, Downs’ approval by the audience comes again at the song’s emotional climax, as she achieves another impressive, enduring note. Vargas would later verbally bestow upon her a symbolic crown in an act of surreal surrogation: “I’m on my way out, but a woman called Lila Downs is here to replace me”. Downs walks to her after her performance, bows down and kisses her hand in a gesture of re-cognition to Vargas’ greatness and her truth.

While this chapter does not focus on the details of this unofficial succession, “Melancholy Tributes” does examine how *sentimiento* is reproduced as a claim to a *ranchera* genealogy and as a pledge to transcendence. The codification of expressive feeling is linked to the making of a pantheon of (now) canonical singers. *Sentimiento* is thus consciously entangled in a politics of homage and affirmation. In addition to analyzing *sentimiento* in the process of surrogation, to use Joseph Roach’s term, I discuss the making of *sentimiento* in producing dissimilar effects in two ways. Specifically, I look at how Downs’ knowledge of *sentimiento*’s codes becomes an asset on a “world” stage—where a public unfamiliar with the codification of *sentimiento* encounters the aesthetic form. In this setting, *sentimiento* is deciphered as a sorrowful, nearly pathological effect of mestizo being, reviving and renewing a decades old discourse. In addition, I inquire into the uses of *sentimiento* as a method for empathy or connection with the Mexican migrant.

First, I will overview key aspects of Downs’ persona, taking special note of her privileged mobility across borders, the nature of her multi-genre, multi-lingual repertoire, and the claims she makes about *ranchera* musical tradition. This background grounds the exploration of the strategic ways *sentimiento* functions in her act. After examining details of video recordings of another instance of homage at the outset of her career (to Lucha Reyes in 1999), I propose to read Downs’ mastery and expertise in the codes of *sentimiento*. These examples further explicate the dynamics of revering and replacing.

Secondly, I review how, in an effort to make the *sentimiento* aesthetic legible to other publics, Downs evokes familiar tropes of suffering, weeping and stoic pride as related to a supposed Mexican character. Upon her success in the world music market, which relies on a concept of “world” as the source of a consumable geographical and cultural musical novelty,

sentimiento's physical codes of emotion are deciphered as an inherent suffering, reifying in a postmodern setting longtime theorizations of the (damaged stereotype) tragic mestizo trope. This occurs because the conventional readings and reception, the affective literacies, to use scholar Neferti Tadiar's term, of the *ranchera* are not present. By probing the historical use of tragic mestizo in defining the national character; probing newspaper archives and interviews, and a reading of her album *La Cantina*, I trace how *sentimiento*'s aesthetic of excess is associated with an intrinsic and authentic condition of psychic injury. Finally, I discuss the slippage between *sentimiento* and sentiment in her work through a discursive analysis of and about her album *La Linea*. I investigate how "feeling" becomes a tool to persuade or "move" listeners about the plight of the migrant. Whether *sentimiento* is a performance (of suffering) or a method (to ethically impress), Downs actively performs a didactic role, claiming a desire of cultural unification. An in-depth analysis of Downs' performances will exemplify these distinctive significations of *sentimiento* in trans-border contexts. To echo bell hooks as she incisively reiterates how publics can render socially liberating musical events/possibilities silent, who is listening, and what do they hear? (hooks 14).

Background

Singer songwriter Lila Downs represents, in her image, voice, body and musical productions, a dizzying surplus of signification of mexicanness. Visually, her corporeality evokes persistent, perhaps clichéd, tropes of mestizaje: her persona, particularly at the outset of her career, resembles artist Frida Kahlo as she wears her hair pulled back. Her braids fall onto her front or joyfully swirl as she dances. Visible, also, is her Mixtec lineage and her Oaxacan

background: her clothes consist of indigenous apparel items including *huipiles* and *rebozos*, elaborately woven and vividly colored. In recent performances while performing “La Llorona”, the weeping woman, she dons the *tehuana*, a simple but imposing white headdress from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Rings adorn her often prominently displayed fingers in photographs. Downs’ biography is consistently discussed in writing about her musical production; it exerts a degree of legitimacy and authenticity over her project of musical fusion. Downs claims a Mixteco indigenous lineage via her mother, the singer Anita Sanchez, as well as the identity of her late Scottish-American father, an anthropologist. However, as a performer, her visibility is due to her identification with the symbols of indigeneity and *mexicanidad*. The loyalty to her mixteco background, and her prominent foregrounding of a generalized indigenous aspect, distinguish her performance, especially of rancheras. Even as her performing look has changed significantly since her first album, from a modest yet exotic appearance to a more revealing, sensual aspect, her dress always features patterns, textiles and accessories associated with *lo indigena*.³¹

Aurally, her singing exudes the ability of the chameleon, crossing over genres, pitches, tones, and timbres, frequently in a single song. Since her first production, *La Sandunga* (1997) Downs displays a voice of virtuosic mimicry and/or of re-learning of vocal personas³². Both her

³¹ Furthermore, *musica ranchera* becomes feminized, while jazz remains the realm of the father figure.

³² I borrow this term from Simon Frith, who theorizes the concept as the singing of a recognizable, distinguishable character. As semiologist Susana Gonzalez Aktories notes, Downs masters the range of recognizable vocal types, from the high-pitched *indio* woman to the deep vocal currents of American jazz singers. In effect, Gonzalez Aktories determines the several

stunning image and versatile vocal abilities are assets to her various publics in the United States and Mexico. As a world music artist, the cross-border legibility of her image (Frida, exotic, indigenous) and her ability to expertly perform *rancheras*, corridos, in various languages, blues, etc, largely determine her appeal and secure her success strongly grounded outside the mainstream. However, she lays claim to the genre of *ranchera* as the primary source of her musical education, as the form and discipline that initially transformed her singing. She credits her mother as teaching her the essential process of singing rancheras, thus affirming a feminine, if not a feminist, genealogy in her musical formation: “You must sing with *sentimiento*”, a method that an article from the New York Times translates as “sentiment, feeling, soul”, a definition that renders it transparent without question.³³ Downs has actively tackled the meaning of the concept. She exerts her knowledge as part of her entertainment, a practice largely inherent within the World Music industry, which largely sponsors and markets Downs. *Sentimiento* here introduces problematics that refresh previous understandings of *sentimiento* (*el sentimiento nacional*, etc.) and force one to keep its differentiality in perspective.

types in Downs’ voice by racializing them. Her analysis introduces the intriguing question on the performativity of race (a concern I attend to later); moreover, her observations also insinuate the musical trajectory of Downs as an artist in motion between musical genres. Her praxis leads me to explore the construction of Downs’ bi-cultural subjectivity, one involving the U.S./Mexico borderlands that this “Ranchera and Jazz singer” exploits and explores in her musical production.

Salute and *Sentimiento*

“Sin embargo, la influencia de su estilo ha sobrevivido al recuerdo de su voz: fue aquel tan acabado y personal, que no han faltado desde la muerte de Lucha canciones que la imiten”

[However, the influence of [Reyes’] style has survived the memory of her voice: her method was so perfect and personal that since her death, singers continue to imitate her]. Morales, *La Musica Mexicana* (165)

In this section, I pay close attention to the affective codification of *sentimiento* through the procedure of salutation that Downs performs in memory and tribute to ranchera idol Lucha Reyes. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate how *sentimiento* is a disciplinary convention that relies on crediting and citing a star-system and songs from a canonical repertoire. This performance underlies Downs’ mastery of *sentimiento* and the repertoires that facilitate it, an expertise that reveals her own learning of *sentimiento* and the eventual teaching of *sentimiento*’s meaning to other publics. In addition, I also wish to attend to particular interventions that Downs applies, tinkering with vocal tones and varying the dress codes.

Downs’ voice emotes, and in doing so, adduces both Lucha Reyes and Chavela Vargas. Discussing the various levels of discourse available in Downs’ musical production, semiologist Susana Gonzalez Aktories broaches the “vocal” aspect of such discourse: the materiality of the voice and its potential to emulate known timbres or generate stereotypical markers of race. In her musical repertory, the voices of Reyes or Vargas are intermittently mimicked or invoked, signifying a voice of denunciation or reclamation (157). Straining the capabilities of the voice

further, another perceivable category in her voice is a racially charged one.³⁴ The case that I now highlight is an instance where these different uses of voice result in generating a *sentimiento* of salutation in a scenario of re-memory.

Though not a conventional ranchera singer, Downs was featured, among other singers, in the Mexican television production “*Boleros y algo mas*” in 1999, performing for the cameras, not for a live audience. At this time, Downs was largely unknown within the greater national and international audience. That particular episode of “Boleros” was a tribute to the late *bravío* singer Lucha Reyes. Invited guests sang a few well-known tunes from Reyes’ repertoire. Downs’ performance included two ranchera classics; the plaintive “Por Un Amor” (For Some Love) and the festive “El Herradero” (The Rancher).

Her dress of choice foregrounds an aesthetic rarely, if at all, seen in a *ranchera*. She wears elaborate jewelry: large, round earrings that pull down on her earlobes. Several necklaces grace her, silvered beads that match the details of her earrings. Her top is a black and golden *huipil*. Her *huipil* is coupled with a long black skirt and a black *rebozo* that hangs down from both sides of her upper arms. Her black hair is pulled back into two braids, fully revealing her face, discretely made up with standout red lipcolor. Nowhere is the burst of hues and flowers, the bare shoulders, the fringes from the hems of a skirt medium skirt, tangling wildly as she dances, all characteristic of her own, and particularly later, performances. She assumes the convention of stillness throughout.

³⁴ Gonzalez-Aktories elaborates on how these timbres make meaning: “famous Latin American icons like Lucha Reyes, Chavela Vargas or Mercedes Sosa, and that in these cases signify the “fighting voice” which denounces and proclaims, almost demands...the register of an African American voice such as Billie Holiday...an indigenous voice”.

Let us first consider her interpretation of “Por un Amor”, a forlorn *ranchera* that narrates the suffering and self-deprecation of the unloved speaker, not an unusual theme of in the tradition of the genre.³⁵ The violins begin the piece, an introduction that suggests weeping, followed by the trumpets’ note marking a musical descent. Initially, the camera focuses on lanterns that adorn the set. Soon thereafter, a brief, silent intermission marks the extravagant entrance of the voice. And, just as the stage is a picturesque reproduction of an old Mexican plaza, so her vocal execution is a quaint re-interpretation of the *bravio* singer. Quaint because it recalls Lucha Reyes’ timbre impressively; it renders Reyes’ singing as a nostalgic act.

The camera, switching its emphasis from the players and toward the singer, focuses on Downs visage and the inscriptions of suffering therein conveyed. She sings “Por un amor” all in one long breath, extending with her voice the vowels in the phrase, clearly marking them with the movement of her mouth: the “O”, the “U”, the “A”, and again the “O”. The musicians continue to play. Downs’ brows furrow and relax, her eyes focusing softly again on some object above before slowly shutting her eyes, facing the floor and again looking upward as she continues to sing that she hardly sleeps (*me desvelo*), that she lives in love (*apasionada*) with a grimace of contempt and suffering, her head nodding as she continues to sing. The next camera angles will take another position; the viewer can see Downs from afar in a half shot, in the instance when she robustly intones the chorus line “*pobre de mi*” which repeats twice; the fist as

³⁵ A selection of “Por Un Amor” by Gilberto Parra follows: “For a love/ I remain passionately awake at night/ I have a love/ that in my life left forever a bitter taste/ I pity myself/ This life better end soon/ It’s not for me/ Poor me!/ (oh heart!)/ Poor me!/ (Don’t suffer more)/ How much my heart suffers, beating only for you [my translation]”.

a powerful chest voice delivery, and after an intake of air, in a mitigated, deeper tone. Her right hand rests on her stomach, her left hand over her chest.

Her eyes also play with this language, ranging from wide-eyed to closed, emphasizing the emotional narrative and its varied dimensions. Her way with looking and with moving and her many vocal modulations conjoin to produce a melodramatic performance of deliberate emotional excess, as anthropologist Olga Nájera-Ramírez asserts in her essay “Unruly Passions”. Nájera-Ramírez’ insights are pertinent to keep in mind how *sentimiento* is working in this televised instance: “The emotions exhibited—and one may assume, induced—in the performance style of the ranchera include sadness, despair, contempt, love and pride. Typically, the ranchera performance style includes not only a vocal display of emotions but *ademanes* (facial, hand, and body gestures) and even tears (188)”. The requirement to sing the words that announce emotional weakness requires significant physical strength. Downs’ deep timbre in this first melodic instance recalls a masculine tessitura. Her resonant pitch is but one recognizable “vocal persona” that she manipulates as she sings, a trademark of her interpretation throughout most of her career. Just as she is able to manipulate her lower register, she raises her pitch in ways that recall a helium-inflected voice in brief instances.

Such instances of a sharply high voice are more prominent in Downs’ rendition of another Lucha Reyes classic, “El Herradero”, a song that, as the title suggests, depicts the *fiesta mexicana* in glorious excess, the milieus and scenarios that have at its center the *charro* archetype discussed in Chapter one. While “Por un Amor” is also a ranchera, “El Herradero” heralds the other, common theme of *bravío* praise to the rural, contrasting with the emotional variance of “Por un Amor”. Just as the subject is the joyous *jaripeo* (rodeo celebration), so the voice must boom with ranchera resonance, with vocal power infused in cultural hubris. Reyes

sang “El Herradero” memorably in the film *Flor Silvestre* (1943) as the entertainer of a *jaripeo*. In the film, Reyes sings from atop the rodeo stands, surrounded by the musicians and onlookers. She showcases a trademark interpretation, ending song lines like “*que bonitas las fiestas de mi rancho*” (how lovely those fiestas of my rancho) not with a flawlessly and potently delivered “o”, but by several forceful pushes on the diaphragm, creating a ‘hooo, hooo’ effect that enhances her individual *bravio* sound and is easily recognizable as Reyes’ own resistance in her vocal chords. Such a portrayal of empowered femininity (and vocal power) is rather contradictorily staged: her movements are restricted to a script where she appears as incidental entertainment, static yet defiant singing a celebratory song.

Downs sings “El Herradero” according to the vocal idiosyncrasies of Reyes, adopting recognizable strategies of the honored singer. She stands with her hands defiantly positioned on her waist, as Reyes would. Words here are not stretched for the sake of emphasizing the plaintive, but accommodate to the lively rhythm of the mariachi. However, Downs also adopts a high-pitched voice in this song, purposefully exaggerated, that does not necessarily coincide with Reyes but exceeds the late singer’s efforts. High pitched, Downs has attributed the helium-like tone (some have called ‘comical’) as *el gusto* (what people like to hear) of indigenous communities.

The lyrics convey a sentiment that further adds tension to its interpretation. “El Herradero” begins with a festive, praising description of the rancho, and soon adopts a narrative point of view that is decidedly male-identified. The imaginary of the *rancho*, from the all-encompassing perspective of the singer (herradero), includes all his possessions, an outlook that conflates women and animals. Comparing mares with women, the lyrics recount the desire of the rancher to tame (the women should be like all the young mares, that pride themselves and tame

themselves with their owner/ and cannot carry a horseman). The voice itself imitates the sounds of taming and domestication, as Downs assumes this voice, occasionally singing with a tone of command and instruction, enouncing words by pushing on the vocal chords. Her singing is influenced by Reyes' *bravío* attitude in song: upfront, assertive willfulness. On the stage where Downs sings, *bravío* is a practice to honor memory, one that suggests a contrasting, subtle set of sentiments and processes: homage, domestication.

Standards of Feeling

To sing *rancheras* in this context of remembrance (particularly to a different generation and in a historical moment of excessive media reproduction) illuminates how memory and performance restate and reassess cultural codes (Roach) of *sentimiento*. Let us consider how. Nearly fifty years after Reyes' death, efforts to memorialize her simultaneously tame her image. With Reyes, one heard the unspeakable shrieked through seemingly innocuous lyrics. Coming to voice by breaking the limit of femininity's decibels, to emote feeling was to resignify a woman's corporeality. Yet, the film inhibits the symbolic transgression of Reyes: The effects of such affective "excess", of such *sentimiento*, in a woman, was something to be contained, as the Mexican film industry did, not without capitalizing on precisely the remarkable method of her feeling. The historical context of Downs' salute to Vargas remembers Reyes, albeit by making and signifying *sentimiento* differently. With Downs, another process occurs in the wake of vivifying emotion intertwined with national pride and memory.

Downs does allude to the effect of Reyes on female ranchera singers. After her death, the style of Reyes became the standard for aspiring *bravia* singers: "*Las cancioneras que siguieron a*

Lucha Reyes tuvieron que adaptarse a ese estilo...tuvieron que creer en el personaje y presentarse como auténticas sucesoras de su personalísima modalidad de ejecución” [Female ranchera singers that followed Lucha Reyes had to adapt to [her] style...they had to believe in the character and represent themselves like authentic successors of Reyes’ highly individual modality of execution] (Moreno Rivas 191). Downs’ intervention in memory is a feat that suggests the mastery of Reyes’ method that cannot and does not seek to replicate her rebellion. Downs participation is also one of several appearances that nationally launch her image in a familiar way.

At the same time that she renders a rather safe *bravío* spectacle, Downs also inserts gestures and vocalizations that mark her uniqueness and entangle the ranchera with *indigenismo*, with the look of a *huipil* and the technique of *el gusto* asserting an indigenous identification, albeit one that is rather diluted. Downs olive-toned skin recalls the most commercially successful ranchera singers are indeed *morenos claros*, fair brunnettes, indeed, the ideal mestizo eradicates the excessive signs of race. Downs’ presence defies this representational constant in a highly subtle manner, if not unseating the master, unseating the image and sound of the visible masterful.

As Downs produces *sentimiento*, her gestures elicit nostalgia at the same time they claim heirloom in mastering the ranchera and the feeling that it transmits. Downs fervent embodiment of *sentimiento* reveals an inheritance project, whose scripts are descended from a matrilineal genealogy. Downs manages her claim and knowledge of the ranchera, its expressive sophistication, or its pioneers on stage. As an artist preoccupied with the diffusion of “roots” music, she is treated as a repository of knowledge that also happens to be a serendipitous “result

of a great voice and intense feeling”, particularly outside of Mexico. In an Argentinian television interview with journalist Felipe Pigna, he asks her about major influences:

Felipe Pigna:

Quienes son tus referentes en la música, personas que te han formado, que vos admirás?

Lila Downs: Una cantante muy especial que se llama Lucha Reyes, que es del canto bravío de México. Con ella...

FP: ...Que es el canto bravío?

LD: Es la música que se desarrolla en el Bajío, en la region de Jalisco...Y esta mujer era una mujer que tomaban la canción que habia sido cantada por el hombre, y la cantaba desde el punto, no se, de la entraña de una mujer, no, como hombre...

FP: Pero como mujer...

LD: Pero como mujer, era un poco las dos cosas. Toda mujer mexicana que canta la música como que parte de eso. Es una postura, es una bendición, no, poder ser una mujer independiente, una mujer...libre.

FP: Who are your references in music, people that have formed you, that you admire?

LD: A singer who is very special, Lucha Reyes, of Mexico’s bravio song. With her...

FP: ...What is the bravio song?

LD: It’s the music that developed in the bajo, in the region of Jalisco...And this woman took the song that had been sung by men and sang it from the point, I don’t know, from the insides of a woman, no, like a man...

FP: But like a woman...

LD: But like a woman, it was a little of both. All Mexican women that sing music follow this. It's a position, a blessing, no, to be an independent woman, a...free woman. [My translation].

As often is the case, Downs explicates and clarifies the performance tradition in which she engages to audiences unfamiliar with the artists, genres, or songs, especially outside of Mexico. Downs credits Reyes' uniqueness and ascribes to it her ability to sing from her "stomach", a method that implies a gendered infringement. In her explanation, Downs identifies how *sentimiento* might provide possible ways of identification that destabilize essential notions of gender. The codified gestures of feeling produce a subject that defies the impositions on a gendered body in singing ("ser...una mujer libre").³⁶ Considering the above connections between the cultural politics of singing "from the stomach" and its historically-based defiance, Reyes' aesthetic invites a reading based on a tenet by Gloria Anzaldúa in her theorization of mestiza consciousness, one that encourages a queer reading of the body's melodrama: "I, like other queer people, are two in one body, both male and female" (qtd. in Arrizón 27).³⁷

³⁶ Because Reyes sang the music "of men" and sang it "like a man" from her "insides", Downs marks her as an innovator that conflated a presumable 'essence' of femininity and masculinity in her voice. Insinuated in her response is the common narrative of Reyes as the original female interpreter of *bravío*. Moreover, her reply also implies that *sentimiento*, as so often has been banally suggested, is conditioned upon interiority: the feeling emerges from inside the singing subject and is exteriorized by the body (insert however, that this anatomic system functions by privileging what emerges from inside the anatomy: Schechner).

³⁷ A traceable pattern of highlighting the gender ambivalence that the interpretation of song in the bravio style promotes is evident. In the article "From the deep well of Tradition", Downs

Through her eloquence and virtuosity, Downs becomes both successor and expert, a simultaneous manifestation of being that, in occupying numerous identitarian categories discussed earlier, also evokes *mestizaje*, although to radically distinct results. Downs recognizes the transgression of a *bravío* singer like Reyes and the particular methods she employed in creating *sentimiento*; she partakes in this imaginary of feminine (and feminist) transgression. However, her cultural productions shift in their signification when mediated in a distinct regime of representation: a discourse that reaches a global audience. *Sentimiento*, besides being a performance, is also an aesthetic to appreciate as part of “the world”, a fantasy of Mexican being. As Downs conveys *sentimiento*, emotes and seduces on stage, the gravity of the performance has less to do with the assertion of a challenging feeling of the subject.

Drawing from, among others, Reyes’ and Vargas’ cultural capital, Downs’ production of voice, music and image, that is, of an entire corporeality, stabilizes the volatility of *sentimiento* as it functions within a national or diasporic imaginary. Furthermore, she transmutes its energetic affects and effects into an inter-cultural domain. She brings this knowledge, this body of expertise, this heritage claim, into a public outside of the Spanish speaking familiar.³⁸

explicates how “a woman becomes kind of a man as she sings [*rancheras*], it’s a play with sexuality and the power that it gives you to sing these songs.”

³⁸ Her performances find a committed audience in Mexico as well as a relatively small yet loyal Latino immigrant spectators anywhere she goes outside of the Americas. These audience members find in Downs the reification of historical memory, the songs of Vargas or Lucha through the *sentimiento* of this mixteca mestiza. This audience is largely familiar with the *rancheras* she interprets, and reacts ecstatically each time. Consider the following New York City example.

In a March 2011 concert at the City Winery, a diverse crowd assembled to sit in this newly

The source: tragic mestizo

After reviewing Lila Downs' careful emulation of *sentimiento* as tribute to Lucha Reyes and Chavela Vargas, I now look into how this becomes digested for a mass market where meaning is impelled toward the damaged stereotype. I now discuss how the display of ranchera poetics echoes a genealogy of thought and generates a discourse of the mechanics of *sentimiento*,

opened establishment, enjoy wine in a romantic, dimly lit environment dominated by scattered candles. Among the crowd, which included couples, group friends, and families, several loudly cheered Downs on, demanding between sets, as is done in any *ranchera* concert, specific songs. This demographic, literate in the poetics of the *ranchera*, energized the concert with its most memorable interactions, precisely when Downs begins a *ranchera*.

Before beginning another song, she narrates an anecdote or makes a statement. This time, she briefly recalls her childhood, recounting how as an eight year old she sang rancheras at family gatherings: "The women would ask my mother, isn't she too young to be singing those cantina songs? But how those same women would enjoy my singing while drinking their tequilas!" Several songs into the concert, Downs grabbed a guitar and hung its strap around her neck and strummed the first key of "Paloma Negra". She utters "*Ya me canso...* I tire of waiting..." and the audience reacts with gritos, with ear-splitting whistles, with responses of empathy, of approval, of admiration and of re-cognition. After the performance, one of the spectators, a Honduran-American woman, asserted her own connection with Downs' earlier comments about the ranchera: "That is the way we also grew up, listening to those songs with our mothers". Her performance encourages a suspended space of hope based on the validation of identity and memory.

not as an aesthetic, but a pathological inheritance. Read as a sorrowful musical artifact as evidenced in media discourse, Downs mobilizes the *ranchera* in strategic ways. The discourse that conflates a national prototype with perpetual injury reveals how *sentimiento*'s mechanics of suffering, of weeping are "ruralized", made archaic, read as residuum derived from the bodily experience of a mythical figure. From the mestizo, however, is extracted its most abject element: the Indian.

I wish to consider now how a catalog of emotional maladies (loss, heartbreak, resentment, desolation) becomes wedded to Downs' *ranchera* performance on the world stage, with a close reading of the discourse that circulates these acts. Moreover, much of the literature published on Downs and her music subtly constructs the singer as a corporeal cipher of intense emotion, a subject that properly suits the fabled narratives fashioned as her biography and geography: she is the *mestiza desgarrada*, the lacerated *mestiza* that evokes the pain of her lacerated being, and that lacerates.³⁹

To begin, the fact that Downs is denominated a *mestiza desgarrada* points to a larger history that weds mestizaje and innate injury. Such seemingly innocuous pairing of noun and adjective echo a lasting view of Mexican character and emotional characteristics, an archive that theorizes the mestizo as a melancholy subjectivity, a body that emotes with suffering as the subaltern, solitary member of a postcolonial society. The words *mestiza* and *desgarrada* marks the alleged uniqueness of Downs in various musical markets while alluding to a centuries old cliché, the melancholic other, that resonates back to the Middle Ages (Abeyta 5).

³⁹ Numerous article titles make reference to Downs as the epitome of mestizaje: "La profunda voz mestiza de Mexico" (2010) "Mestiza artist Downs recently embraces both her parents' heritage" (2004), "Deslumbrante hechizera de la canción *mestiza*" (n.d.).

This image of the mestizo as afflicted was specific to early 20th century Mexico and was widely discussed and promoted by the intelligentsia. This mestizo belonged within a wide spectrum of Mexican archetypes that echo similarly negative, perhaps romanticized, connotations. Sociologist Roger Bartra has discussed that the trope “reaches into from the stooping Indian to the mestizo pelado, passing through the major points of articulation of the Mexican soul: *melancholy-illness-fatalism-inferiority/violence-sentimentalism-resentment-escapism*” (Bartra 8, emphasis in original). The mythic body of suffering, and its variations, was a highly elastic trope favored as an epistemic category in early to mid 20th century scholarship. Musicologist Vicente Mendoza, for example, points out the peasant roots of the ranchera in a historical exposition that builds an “othering” historiography. As city-based and Italian or Spanish influenced *canciones mexicanas* were in vogue with urban elites and musicians playing them toured the Bajío region, the *canción romantica*, in his view, filtered into the peasant population in the mid 19th century, a people that transformed the music by simplifying its metric structure, “*imprimiendo a las melodias los rasgos netos del alma mexicana*” [imprinting upon the melodies the true traits of the Mexican soul] (42). Furthermore, scholar Juan S. Garrido notes how, circa 1910, mestizos sang “Spanish and Mexican songs in a style that differed from the Spaniard’s way of singing them. There’s another “feeling”, a new *sentimiento*” (Geijerstam 67). Musicologist Claes Geijerstam further cements the ranchera to as a peasant song “imbued with a lot of “Mexican” spirit (Geijerstam 67). The complex transculturation occurring as the *canción ranchera* became known as such includes the development of a performance of emotion, read by those writing about music as the authentic extracts of a classed, gendered, mestizo source.

Contemporary studies of *mexicanidad*’s relationship to music echo this enduring reading. In her ethnographic work, anthropologist Mulhollan (2007) traces the emotional myths of

mestizaje in her study of the discourse that encircles mariachi history. In an analysis that reflects the influential tragic mestizo concept, she outlines how the lamenting character of mariachi musicians is traced to the economy of indentured servitude. The sound and the feeling of loss, melancholy, etc., is attributed to the difficulty of hacienda life for the male workers classified as mestizo in the lowest strata, considered the first mariachi players.

The historical memory of adversity experienced by *campesino* forefathers, a gendered line of remembrance, is the source of *sentimiento* in this discourse. The first players of “this mestizo music” labored in harsh conditions in haciendas and expressed “the grit, sweat, blood and tears of this difficult life, and their bond with the land through mariachi music...produced vision of the Mexican man as brave, rugged, hard working and rural”. Thus, “grit, sweat, and blood” of the peasant are ideally transmuted onto the bodies of mariachi musicians, as signs of the intense labor of musicians. Grit and bodily secretions signify the interiority of this melancholy peasant and become the metaphor and to a certain extent, markers for pain and suffering associated with the mestizo *campesino*. In such lore, the manifestation of (suffering) feeling becomes the result of a racial logic derived from a ‘tragic’ history of submission and resistance that generate a suffering body. As the mestizo is a product of a racial imagination that commences with colonial incursion, *sentimiento* is made the vestige of the subaltern that results from this history.

In discussions of the *ranchera*, Lila Downs echoes this dense, exhausted philosophy. Downs expounds a view of the *ranchera* as a genre linked to historical memory of anguish that finds liberation in expression. Consider the following quote, one where Downs explains the performance process of a *ranchera*, a process that evokes the memory of an embattled corporeality:

There is not way to sing [the *ranchera*] without that true *sentimiento*. There are several people that simply sing the *ranchera* but do not cry it. That's what it's about, about something that cries deeply, even as the lyrics deny any suffering, any crying. There is also something in the *ranchera* about the pride of being, the pride of existing and of never doubting such pride. It's something inherited from the tradition of the rancho, of the countryside, of the man that is so pride and does not give in to anything! Not even to death! And that's something that women also inherit, at a certain point, women sing Mexican music in their way and transforms all that. (An interview with Lila Downs: *Arte y Vida Chicago*, my translation)

In this theorization, *sentimiento* is analogous to sadness and suggests that, beyond sorrow, the “cry” is also a prideful gesture, the inverse of submissive weeping, one undeniably linked to the mestizo theorization above. Such sadness is also connected to emotional authenticity. A transposition of a Cartesian axiom occurs: I suffer, therefore I am. (“the pride of being, the pride of existing”). *Sentimiento*, a discipline based on music making, is also a discipline based on the making of a people. Moreover, Downs' explanation renders the mechanics of affect an issue of inheritance and of surrogacy. Downs' continuation of this myth renders her legible, and legitimate, to her “local” and “global” audience. The purpose of such a myth is not to legitimate a governmental regime, but is itself a set of codes of representation that she maneuvers in cross-border contexts, augmenting its possibilities.

One of these possibilities is a subtle reification of the emotive excess inherent in *lo mexicano*, and the expression of this excess in music (not only *ranchera*). As Downs claims a role as the bridge between cultures, this is particularly germane to a study of how *sentimiento*

may signify in the throes of a globalized musical market. Her album *La Cantina* evinces such reification; moreover, in keeping with the traits of World Music markets, this re-definition is done in liner notes. A discursive analysis of this album's critical acclaim, as well as Downs' own framing of the content, suggest how Downs "revives" a genre for a global audience as much as she revives the discourse of a nationally marked sadness, one proper to the Mexican, but also accessible to anyone in the audience, as the press release of *La Cantina* proclaims.

In the text of the album's press release, the *ranchera* is introduced as a "song of heartache...typically performed in a cantina". Moreover, the genre is comparatively situated geographically and sonically, related to other "world" genres, a technique that makes connections in an effort to facilitate understanding: "It is a musical tradition quite akin to Portugal's fado, or to the Delta blues—deeply soulful, often lamenting, always emotionally vivid". Downs and her musical partner Paul Cohen are quoted, "Our new album brings out smiles and complicity from everyone in the audience. After all, who doesn't like to go out to a bar, have some drinks, and cry to your favorite songs?" (Narada). The domain of the *ranchera* is made relatable, familiar, beyond any linguistic or cultural obstacles, by paraphrasing one of the most well known *ranchera* songs, *Tu Recuerdo y Yo* by Jimenez: "who doesn't know in this life, the familiar betrayal, that love causes? Who doesn't go into a cantina, asking for a drink, asking for a song?". In this way, the feeling of desolation evoked in the lyrics and in the performance of the song is devised as a feeling of universality at the same time these words transmit a purported national idiosyncrasy. In particular, the role of liquor, of tequila, of alcoholic perdition, is prominent among the lyrics—a beloved repertoire "crosses over" into a space where it is simultaneously familiar as stereotype. The production of the album satisfies the general

expectations that the inebriated self and the inebriated other be represented. Thus, the romantic angst of the ranchera is overlaid with (racialized) melancholy and bold musical interpretations.

The following example illustrates how the methods that produce *sentimiento* are juxtaposed with another genre, thus highlighting the distinctiveness of the ranchera's emotivity as it relates to jilted romance. "Your memory and I" is Jose Alfredo Jimenez' song, revised by Downs as a ranchera with *hip hop* musical elements and an interweaved, rapped narrative. A reading of the official recorded version follows, cross-analyzed with a live performance at the Womadelaide festival in Australia of the same song. In the official recorded version, the song begins with Downs' impeccable rendition of whimpers—again the respiratory apparatus in audible tension—between the opening, words voiced in a deep baritone that announce the location of the speaking subject, "I am /in the corner /of a cantina". In the video of one of several performances, Downs wears a typical ensemble: a multicolor, floral *huipil* as a top and a knee long purple skirt with floral details. The outfit is clearly a unique, non-traditional creation, the open neckline of the shirt and its minimal sleeve allow for a modestly sensual cut that references the color and the patters of Mexican indigenous garb.

A forlorn guitar accompanies her dirge, "I'm listening / to a song / I asked for", as well as base chords that menace and foretell the electronic elements that follow this minimalist introduction. "They are serving me now my tequila", she continues, and once she declares, "there goes my thought toward you". As she mentions these words, the camera focuses on her facial expressions: her grimaces, her eyebrows furrow, her gaze turned downward, her body hunched. At the mention of tequila, her bodily position changes. From the downward direction, a fierce gaze quickly appears as she moves her free left hand (the other with the microphone) vigorously, emphasizing the aggressive, nearly masculine wail in its expression of pain and of pride, as she

has described it. Not only does her use of her arms in similarly imperious fashion continue; in the next section, Downs is in constant movement, dancing the energetic anger and bitterness of the song, complementing the vocal mechanics of disappointment and pride with a bodily rhythm that the hip hop pattern allows.

As she chides viewers and listeners with her bodily gestures, a rhythmic baseline disturbs the elegiac lyrics. An electric guitar stirs unexpectedly as Downs discontinues abruptly her low-pitched vocal color. She switches to a bass voice, saying words with less melody and more speed, a tone of spite in a rap-like, unsentimental execution. These, her own lyrics, contribute a feminist edge to the song, mimicking the ranchera's attitude of questioning and commands. Her voice is buoyed by a combination of synthesizers, weeping violins and acoustic guitars. Back to the original lyrics of the song, Downs' movements travel between the triumphant and the agonizing. In singing "I come here to remember/ how bitter are the things that happen to us/ when a beloved pays our love badly", her back arches as she limps forward, as her voice signals the opposite of her body: a powerful, flexible, emoting voice in control of its contrasts. Throughout the song, Downs alternates between the emotional voice and the accusatory, irate tone of her rap, its defiant rhymes commanding the male gendered listener, "remember who birthed you/ remember who birthed you". Her movement is also of significance. Constantly charging from one end of the busy stage to the other and striking with her long arms as any seasoned rapper would, she also pauses at key times with affective force, with the *sentimiento* of the ranchera.

The song, an indulgent display of musical contrasts as well as vocal methods, satisfies the desire for both authenticity and the vanguard. The careful coalescing of disparate sounds proved to be particularly successful to reviewers writing for world music outlets. To Daniel Brown, a

critic in the world music arena for Mondomix.com, Downs' combination of rap and rock blended "beautifully and convincingly" with "this classic Mexican mode that is synonymous with passion and romance. Since rancheras can be played with 2/4, 3/4, and 4/4 rhythms, it is malleable and amenable to crossover music". The *ranchera* is braided with other musical and affective patterns, and becomes recognizable through its hybrid incorporation into other styles, absorbing into a greater form. Sentimiento here is appreciated in its simultaneously contrasting and exotic delivery, one that recalls a comment by senior director of artists and repertoire for Narada, Richard Denhart: "I was struck by her voice and the commitment that she has made to her cultural background—she integrates it in a very modern way that makes it accessible" (With a Song in her Soul).

While Brown lauds her efforts, such experiments are also deemed a messy, unsuccessful attempt to modernize, so to speak, the *ranchera*. Agustin Gurza, a critic writing for the Los Angeles Times, rather facetiously considers Downs' version of "Tu Recuerdo y Yo" a "vehicle for feminist revenge" surely to be frowned on by its writer, Jose Alfredo Jimenez. Other rancheras in the album, "Amarga Navidad", "Pa' Todo el Ano", and "La Noche de mi mal", delivered in no intensively experimental way, are to his judgment more effectively delivered, showcasing her powerful voice and its ability to dramatically contrast tempos and volume.

These songs of *La Cantina* are rendered, instrumentally, in a style reminiscent of Chavela Vargas' repertoire, without the mariachi and only the glitter of a guitar and a harp, the tempo sedate and solemn. Vocally, Downs achieves the balance between "husky lows and high vibratos", achieving the effects of *sentimiento* in a traditional, powerful manner, one that contrasts with the previous experimentation of "Tu Recuerdo y Yo". In a gesture that further marks Downs as a 'world' artist due to the overemphasis of the traditional cantina, these

rancheras are accompanied with the sounds of flowing drinks, the clinking of glasses, and anonymous voices of people assembled in a common space. They evoke the smoke that accumulates and infuses the closed spaces of the bar, circulating relentlessly the same air, and the same stories, the same complaints of manly disillusion sung in the distressed ranchera voice. While the labor invested in this production demonstrates a skillful take on the performance of *sentimiento* on Downs' part, they also yield a discussion, again, about the source of such evocations of pain, sorrow, etc.

It is important to note that this album is published at a moment when Downs is a more prominent figure in the greater international scene. As her notability is enhanced, the discourse of *sentimiento*, particularly that directed to and generated by English speaking media, becomes more discernable. With the release of "La Cantina", *sentimiento* became officially an aspect of the repertoire that is not only the music, the lyrics, and the voice, but also a deep emotion. The expression of feeling became further attached to notions that mimic and further simplify the *mestizo tragico* trope. Moreover, the facilitated access to a larger, more global audience "worlds", so to speak, *sentimiento* as knowledge of another's music.

In part as a result of Downs' performances, English language media, the *ranchera* becomes a concept to break down digestibly. In an interview for *La Prensa San Diego*, Downs addresses the question of the ranchera, classifying its lyrics as the lyrics of the Mexican, "...it's very tragic, it's about something you can't have and it's about feeling sad for yourself, and drinking. It's a release of anger, of discontent, sadness. I think we're a very sad, melancholic people..." (Martinez). While these explanations aim to clarify, they also mystify and blur the line between aesthetic and inherent. For the sake of legibility and/of satisfaction, Downs resorts to a didacticism of simplistic dimensions. Although Downs' performance of *sentimiento* is based on

the effects and affects of disillusion, these explanations transform performance into the ontology of subjectivity, a view that Downs herself would seem to promote. Downs situates her release *Shake Away* (2010) in a more positive space, as she says, half-jokingly, “since sometimes alcohol will take you into a darker one” (Whitney). Essentializing the aesthetic as a cathartic form to release a pathology suggested as racially inherent seem to satisfy the expectations of emotion expressed through the metaphor of suffering, tragedy, fatalism, and drunkeneess. Downs, a greatly admired artist of repute, is not free of the signifiers of *mexicanidad* and she has somehow agreed to work with them in order to expand the reaches and legibility of her musical labor. However, the purpose of *sentimiento* in her artistic vision includes other ways besides a maneuvering of the weight of the damaged stereotype.

An Empathetic Force

When analyzed as a musical production that thrives in a world market economy and strongly relies on its signification of *mexicanidad*, *sentimiento* reifies safe interpretations of the hurting subaltern. However, as the production of Downs and the framing of her work demonstrate, *sentimiento* is also a pedagogical tool used to move others into feeling plights that have less to do with the passion of romance and more with physical and social precarity.

Long considered a cultural translator of sorts, Downs often advocates for intercultural dialogue. As the daughter of an Mixtecan Mexican mother and a Scottish American father, Downs cites her experience as a bicultural citizen as the catalyst of her musical career, one where *sentimiento* as an emotional experience became steered as a tool for cross-cultural understanding. In the press release of *La Cantina*, this use of sentiment toward awareness, knowledge and goodwill is suggested. A story that is often circulates in interviews, articles and other

publications, is that of how Downs experienced her desire to sing after rejecting it as a “superficial act”. As a young woman working with her mother in Oaxaca, Downs recounts, she was asked to translate a document in English by a family. The report was a death certificate of a relative that had died while crossing the border into the United States. They wished to know how their family member had died. Curiously, the press release for *La Cantina* relates this instance as one of *sentimiento*, a feeling related to empathetic connection. Downs cites this moment of being the translator of the deaths of the migrants as a pivotal motivator that inspired her to practice song as an act that can move others to honor, to know or understand. This oft-used example serves as a synecdoche to situate Downs as a mouthpiece of the “two” cultures she is often made to represent. In a radio interview to World Vision in 2007, she elaborates on her desire to use her music as device to propagate fellowship:

trying to bridge those cultures, trying to get people together, people from the US, who sometimes didn't know about Mexican cultures, the diversity that we have, and also in Mexico a lot of ignorance about what it means to be North American, all we are is eat hot dogs and hamburgers (laughs). (Wehmeyer)

Such a display of desire to teach about and become a channel of another's culture hints at how *sentimiento* also functions as an epistemological instrument to feel for the subaltern “other”; in particular, the immigrant other in the United States. While Downs' use of *sentimiento* can be the naturalization of a rather exoticized, inherent suffering, it is also a tool to communicate another's experience. In this latter understanding, *sentimiento* is utilized and recognized as a pedagogical tool of culture, as a tool of and for invoking empathy with the plight of the other. I do not wish to discredit or reduce the dynamics at work in the making of music by Downs and

her band. But I do wish to complicate the epistemologies of cultural forms, particularly in music promoted as a cultural catalyst for intercultural understanding, a music received with enthusiasm and hope, especially in Mexico and in the greater Americas, due to her original compositions. Whereas *sentimiento* more often than not is produced and recognized in a culturally specific domain, Downs disturbs this usual mode and performs *sentimiento* through rancheras as part of a transcultural project.

This use of *sentimiento* conjures ‘sentiment’ and its derivatives as the category of analysis utilized in recent interdisciplinary scholarship that discusses the ambiguous and evasive cultural politics of this plastic and pervasive term, to use June Howard’s evaluation. Discussions of sentimentality have often focused on popular novels of the antebellum period, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) being the most prominent. An archetypal case study of sentiment in American Cultural Studies, Beecher Stowe’s novel spurred discussions on how anti-slavery literary productions elicited affective identification of the reader with the enslaved. In the discourse of sympathy, sensibility and sentiment that grew out of the vast literature associated with temperance and emancipation, the appeal to feeling, in portraying the suffering of another, as a tool against the evils (of slavery) was the privileged mode of persuasion.

As Beecher Stowe herself wrote in the novel, “There is one thing that every individual can do, - they can see to it that *they feel right*. An atmosphere encircles every human being; and the man or woman who *feels* strongly, healthily and justly, on the great interests of humanity, is a constant benefactor to the human race” (qtd. in Burgett, 215). Clearly, such appeals were generated from a privileged class and circulated among the literate at their leisure. Moreover, the emphasis on sympathy and identification are affiliated with domestic ideology and located in the sphere of the domestic (Howard). The benign goals of these sentimental stipulations are part of

what cultural critic Lauren Berlant describes as the sentimental-utopian sphere, where the appeal to feeling solicits attention to social injustice, but where the fear of too much change hovers, limiting any potentially destabilizing eruptions. As she states in her book *The Female Complaint*, “sentimentality performs a desire for change lubricated by emotional compliance” (46).

In contrast to the archival collection mentioned above, the music of Downs draws legitimate similarities insofar as her musical production is consciously deployed to educate and to move listeners into empathetic consciousness through a musical rhetoric. There are interesting parallels worth noting here regarding how a globalized, postmodern sentimental mode potentially operates in Downs’ work. While the feminized, uncorrupted conception of “home” served as a symbolic framework from which to energize efforts to make the consumer, the reader, “feel right”, a romanticized notion of “music” is here made a similar catalyst for change. Moreover, as music promoted as “World” music, a regime of representation that de-territorializes in favor of universality would further seem to guarantee world music’s ability to communicate beyond difference.

The first example I wish to elucidate is part of her 2000 album *Border: La Linea*. This conceptual album dedicated “to the Mexican migrants, to the spirits of those who have died crossing the line”, and all its songs speak to this larger theme. These include songs by Woody Guthrie as well as *corridos*, and original tunes by Downs and her team of musicians⁴⁰. The mix of various Indigenous and folk instruments creates a highly varied, thoroughly hybrid, striking

⁴⁰ The article “Mixteca con Jazz, Gospel y Hip Hop” from Spain notes that Downs “recognizes that she inherits...the spirit of Woody Guthrie; it could not be any other way given the inequality and diasporas that we re-experience: woman and mestiza”.

sound, all part of the appeal of her project. Such instruments and the modern arrangement of traditional Maya or Zapotec songs alongside rancheras, for example, enhances the vision of Downs' music label company, Narada. Narada, as their website claims, is widely noted as a leader in defining and establishing new instrumental and world music. The album also showcases Downs' musical versatility and proves her a masterful student of a multiplicity of genres, techniques and languages.

The classic ranchera, *Corazoncito Tirano*, Little Tyrant Heart (Cuco Sanchez 1950s), is also part of this album. The lyrics of *Corazoncito Tirano* are simple and mournful declarations in the first person that lament the absence of a loved one:

Wherever I go I remember you/ the wind, brings me your voice/ To what lands does your walking take you/ What stars illuminate your way? Is your path good or bad?/ what mouth erases the kisses that I gave you/ little tyrant heart...

The instrumentation is not a typical mariachi, but a gently arranged set of percussion and electric guitars, acoustic base and Rhodes piano. The song's simplicity and versatility allow for multiple and even contested meanings. While the lyrics signify romantic suffering, they also accommodate to the album's theme of immigration. Downs performs this song with the markers of *sentimiento* that evoke yearning and suffering. *Sentimiento* is a corporeal inter-text that serves the purpose of the metanarrative of migrant resilience and persistence. Moreover, the varied styles of music and performance showcased in this album aid a didactic purpose, one that Downs maneuvers particularly in English speaking media outlets.

In a recent interview titled “The Enigmatic Lila Downs”, Al Carlos Hernandez asks her about her upbringing, her success in Europe, as well as about her goals. Downs’ responds with her ultimate desire to move people to “remember that we all had some parent or grandparent who worked these fields, swept the floor, or produced lettuce or strawberries”. The desire to have an impact on the way people think and feel is not a characteristic unique to Downs. Yet, an intriguing parallel between *sentimiento* and sentiment, between aesthetic and a notion of moral and ethically driven feeling, occurs here. The song ‘*Corazoncito Tirano*’ aims, like the greater CD, to move particular demographics into sympathy, into listening and into memory. As the English liner notes of the CD, written by Betto Arcos, attest:

In this recording, Lila Downs sings about the immigrant experience without sounding preachy or intellectual. She is their voice in both joy and pain. She sings about love...which has no borders and is felt by everyone rich or poor, immigrant or not. These songs tell their story...listen and remember.

Arcos presents Downs as a representative voice and love as a universal feeling, proffering a discourse of feeling the other’s plight through music, particularly in this case through the vivification of *sentimiento*. As Downs mentions in the radio interview report mentioned earlier for World Vision, her challenge is bringing in, especially to Anglo audiences, Latin forms of aesthetic, “ and sometimes, you know, Anglos have this vision that we’re just this dramatic people, which is partly true, but that’s what’s beautiful about the culture and what I’m trying to do in our songs is to make people feel somehow and to relate, even if you can’t speak the language, [to try] and understand those differences and not turn your back on them”.

Thus, the performance of *sentimiento* is a didactic intercultural showcase and an instrument to advance cross-border fellowship and solidarity. Downs, when saying “even if you can’t speak the language”, recalls a centuries old fascination with the voice and a belief in its ability to communicate transparency and sincerity beyond linguistic difference. To return to the voice, which is especially pertinent to *sentimiento*, the epistemology of transparency in timbre particularly suits the goals of a world music industry. In this enterprise, the voice is often privileged as it fortifies the trope of exocitism beyond any other function that, in this case, the aesthetic of *sentimiento* may accomplish. As scholar James Barrett has noted “for World Music the grain [of the voice] is appropriated for metonymic and substitutive roles in western value systems. It is presumed to embody Enlightenment notions of the essential moral, ethical and emotional qualities of humankind”. That is, the voice represents an unspoiled source that enables fantasies of empathy, particularly in the global stages where Downs performs, be they through radio, television interview, or live performance. Indeed, Downs’ performance has been hailed, for example, by the *Los Angeles Times*, as “a reflection of 21st century world culture where ethnicity and national boundaries blur” (L. Muñoz).

Conclusion

The creation of *sentimiento* in performance as a discourse of innate emotivity and as a pedagogical tool of/for empathy illustrates the varied subject positions Lila Downs occupies a significant position within the complex representational regimes of *mexicanidad*. Significantly, these uses of *sentimiento* by Downs demonstrate the privilege of crossing national, linguistic, and cultural borders. Her mestizaje is produced in a space of advantage, a condition that

permeates her music making, often acknowledged as activist. A performer with privileged geographical mobility, Downs can master the needs of a transnational label and the tastes of transcultural publics.

The haphazard maneuvering of multiple identities, and of embodying multiple voices, sheds further light onto how *sentimiento* signifies here—a performance of another’s emotion, a performance to master as a cultural artifact, all the while being able to traverse these modes constantly. Moreover, as it becomes a *worlded* expression, *sentimiento*’s primary function is to conciliate, to assuage, to convince. Unlike Chavela Vargas’ example of transculturation in Spain, Lila Downs’ is not beholden to the traditional uses of *sentimiento* as the sole manifestation in her work. Rather, she speaks about it, decodes it for the other listener, while performing it. Yet, let us consider the basis that yields this brand of performance. Jose Luis Benavides prefaces his interview with the artist with the following description of his subject’s *mestizaje*:

Lila Downs’ sound can’t be categorized any more than our bodies and histories can be locked into static nationalities or geo-political spaces. Her music reflects the journey of migrant Mexican peoples traveling across genres, from cumbias to corridos, African root, blues and beat style poetry-rap. As our transnational communities often go unheard and unnoticed, we are safe in knowing a champion of humanism still shouts the peoples’ song. Lila Downs’ precise and poignant political voice, her lyrics and representative, world sound fuel the spirit, the body and the mind to sound all the alarms and keep fighting for the people. Lila’s voice has flourished into an international icon of progress and positivity (Interview: Lila Downs)

In contrast with the tragic mestizo discussed earlier, here Downs is more aligned with a distinct connotation of the term, one tied to Anzaldúan thought. Down's ability to evoke many voices, to embody several cultures simultaneously, is reminiscent of the theoretical capabilities of the "new mestiza". This paradigm is particularly suited to this study of *sentimiento*, as well as the challenges it represents. Yet, when does this power to claim a number of communities and/or identities trivialize the complexities of belonging?

To consider these questions, I turn briefly to Hames-Garcia, whose work carefully questions the notion of the 'new mestiza', particularly Anzaldúa's celebration of hybridity and internationalism. To recall quickly, strongly rooted in Chicana borderland subjectivity, the new mestiza:

 copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else. (79)

In its expansiveness and extraordinary promise, the radical beauty of being that the 'new mestiza' proffers, Hames-Garcia argues, resembles at times profit motivated corporate multiculturalism (110). What the new mestiza is able to do echoes the power of transnational corporations or the potential of their products to cross the boundaries into different 'markets'. While Hames-Garcia does acknowledge these criticisms to Anzaldúa's work may simplify the complexity of her thought, he wishes to clarify the potentially dangerous and universalist

interpretations of the new mestiza. Moreover, he elucidates what is at stake in the new mestiza theory, stating: “her theory does owe us a sense of how and when different forms of hybridity might prove more or less resistant to given instances of domination”. That is, new mestizas’ hybridity are of a subversive character, and disrupt the hierarchical order

As an “ambassador”, a respected international though relatively marginal performer, as a representative of amalgamated aspects of Mexican and Latin-American musical performance and culture, Downs resembles the practice of the new mestiza. The language she uses to discuss *sentimiento*, and the codes her musical, visual corporeal performance of *sentimiento* uses to convey it, are very much in line with this new mestizaje -- resistant, liberating, challenging to dichotomous legacies and stereotypes, but also pleasing to, nearly subservient to, compatible with, adaptable to, a corporate market, one where *sentimiento* is a desirable trend to consume through her, a marker of authenticity. Her labor circulates in a musical economy, so called World Music, where *sentimiento*, as a performance tradition that conforms her ‘mestizanness’, becomes a fresh corpo-cultural matrix of feeling to discover, to consume.

In this context, *sentimiento* is part of an amalgamation of cultural expressions that validates and asserts space. At the same time, her *sentimiento* is also a safe expression of Mexican tradition, particularly in the United States. Often, interviewers, article writers, and the like inquire into a particular aspect of Downs’ repertoire, dress, or her thoughts on a diverse range of politically sensitive topics, including identity and immigration. While access to such a commanding position is indeed empowering, at times, when the subject of a conversation turns to the ranchera and more precisely to *sentimiento*, explanations, turned into text, convey a simple, maybe simplifying answer that easily conforms, satisfies or amuses an audience. *Sentimiento* is always in tension in its delivery, always tactical in its manifestation: as marketing

construction and identity signifier, an act of praise or test of belonging. Perhaps there was no irony in Chavela's oracle, "a woman called Lila Downs will take my place". Her intuition pointed at a singer who conscientiously aspired for a *sentimiento* to reach little tyrant hearts of 21st century maladies, even as this 21st century *sentimiento* introduces a different predicament of its own.

EPILOGUE

Throughout *Corporealities of Feeling*, I've suggested how *sentimiento* is a multifaceted performance descriptive of vocal and bodily evocations and sensations with profound cultural repercussions. *Sentimiento*, which I defined in the introduction as the manifestation of genuine fervencies of the self and emotional conditions (*celos, angustia, despecho, etc*), is generative of much more than staging through the body and voice the passions of patriotism, hope, despair, etc. I demonstrated how the ebb and flow of emotional depictions through voice and song is also manipulated by mediating technologies to create the illusion of a transcendent and universalist notion of *mexicanidad*. Thus, entangled in the act of song is the communication of competing gendered narratives of the nation and of contested notions of ethnic "authenticities". Moreover, intercultural histories and encounters may be conjured in the merger between feeling and music.

My task was to situate *sentimiento* as a particular and historical mode of performance and identification and not a transcendental instance that transmits a timeless national essence. I established *sentimiento* as an aesthetic form that shapes and is shaped by each singer's corporeality and historical circumstances, and I analyzed the politics embedded in its production and effects. In doing so, my study focused on the intersection of *sentimiento* and the Mexicana singing body, a figure that simultaneously summons the subjectivity of female, poor, queer, mestizo or Indian bodies. Considering this point, I especially contemplated throughout the dissertation how her powerfully emotive figure in performance was and is represented as dramatically abject. I demonstrated how the Mexicana singing body fashions *sentimiento* for transgressive ends. Thus, their efforts convene techniques and strategies that produce three main epistemologies: a feminist, decolonial method enacted through the *bravío*, a mode of lesbian

articulation that queers the masculine lament, and an affective tool to channel empathy and compassion for the migrant.

As an epilogue, I wish to briefly review and reiterate the singular ways each performer embodies *sentimiento*. I pay particular attention to differences in voice and musical execution of each performer in order to identify their signature method of depiction and process. Then, I make a shift—from writing a reappraisal to proposing series of concluding insights on the values that constitute *sentimiento*. My observations derive from appreciating these women’s performances as well as engaging available interviews in the case of Vargas and Downs.

To begin, Lucha Reyes’s trenchant voice and daring vocal method were accompanied by the vivacious playing of the commercial mariachi band. Her voice spawned a calculated bravado that captured the nuances of the patriotic and grandiloquent and competed with the music’s attractive sonority. Reyes’ *bravío* conveyed the inexpressible and taboo within the form of the familiar—her female identified tone was suggestive of rage and the need to be heard against odds. The effacement of her soprano timbre was not all that complete, nor did her vocal method erase the intelligibility of her words, yet there is a certain force of violent proportion in what I argued was her making of a decolonial singing method. As Frantz Fanon remarks, “decolonization is always a violent event” (1), a provocative statement when we consider the role of the body in the “violence” of liberation and in thinking how Reyes’ voice somehow erases itself in order to be heard. In articulating her iconoclastic world, Reyes revolutionized her body, defied normative expectation, and made audible an otherwise unheard claim. Reyes chose to exemplify a female potency and persuasiveness, an emotionally conveyed self-determination informed by the historical moment of the revolution and internal migration. Her very name,

Lucha, points to the concise and precise verb she epitomized: in her case, *luchar*—to struggle-- is analogous to *sentir*—to feel.

This correspondence may be similarly applied to Vargas, although her *sentimiento* relies on methods contrary to the *bravío* and is generative of other affective sets. Her singing borrows certain accents of the *bravío*, but she explores expressions less associated with triumph and swagger. Vargas primarily sings *rancheras* and *boleros*, and in doing so has created an interpretive style that conjoins the core ambiance of each genre, in her words, “the sweetness and poetry of Antillean bolero and the gut wrenching emotions of Mexican feeling” (*Y si quieres saber*, 130). Stripping away the sounds of the fiesta prevalent in the *ranchera* in decades past, distant from the spirited strumming of mariachi guitars, Vargas illuminates love and its vicissitudes, inspecting its sonorous worlds with surgical precision, particularly the sounds of dying or ill-fated love: “the mixture of [emotional] color is important”, Vargas explains about singing Agustín Lara’s song “*Se me hizo fácil*”, an assertion that serves as a blueprint for her more general interpretive style, “it speaks of erasing the memory of a woman, but when I sing it, the memory of said woman is still very painful...I want to explain [in singing] the number of colors, forms, turns, and spins those apparently inoffensive lyrics can offer...in each letter, in each space, in each pause there are extremely delicate strokes that, in my opinion, are necessary to transmit to the public” (133, my translation) . In the mixing among and between elements of genre, a key blending is the amplified emotional *mélange* itself. As she explains above in very choreographic terms, she studies the lyrics and she explores ways to express their nuance with different, subtle sounds.

Each word presents an explosive possibility to convey what has become Vargas’ trademark in song: her incorporation of grief and ecstasy in a single phrase. In this sense, her method

suggests a different idea of “musical” fusion. Rather than showcase elaborate arrangements or visual spectacle, Vargas privileges the *affective* crux of each genre in order to distill a product that foregrounds an overwhelming coalescence of delirium, mostly wretched but sometimes joyous. The mixture of musical feeling and its sensuous overtones accentuated by the sounds of grief yields a strange, seductive result, a queer mestizaje, to borrow from Alicia Arrizón’s notion.⁴¹ Vargas likewise renews the cultural forms she appropriates and mixes: the mestizaje of distinct codes of feeling, as well as her overall engagement with the *ranchera* as a lesbian, may thus be understood as queer per Arrizón’s conceptualization: The tone of existential resignation that Vargas conveys through her repertoire is intertwined with the eroticism of her vocal colors. Finally, Vargas reveals and makes palpable the very flesh of feeling deeply inhibited in the everyday. Her proclivity for the isolation of words and the feeling of romantic failure achieve an effect that turns into triumph, as Monsiváis has eloquently noted: “Chavela’s music occurs behind closed bedroom doors, her music eliminates the fiesta and its undoing of sentiments—her task is the fixing of feeling, where lyrics of and about failure transform into the victory of recollection, into the triumph of memory...” (qtd. in Palacios). Thus, Vargas’ physical strategies of performance convey not so much a single emotion, but the memory of that emotion, the memory of a cultural repertoire. To remember the pain is to overcome it, in this instance, to feel it again is to combat it. That transmutation that occurs in her act is at the core of the individuality of her *sentimiento*, rendering *pena y fracaso*, sorrow and ruin, a triumphant articulation.

⁴¹ Using a postcolonial framework, Arrizón renews the oft rehearsed concept of mestizaje in order to propose its integration with queerness and thus “demystify certain kinds of normative practices”, to acknowledge the fashioning of new subjectivities, and to explore how mestizaje may be understood as “the performance of ‘subordinated’ knowledge” (3).

These two singers, Reyes and Vargas, are performers that Lila Downs honors and invokes in her music. Like Reyes, a classical operatic training is evident in Downs' voice. And, like Vargas, she does not limit her repertoire to only *rancheras*, although her claim of the genre as her initial disciplining platform and her consistent adaptations of classic songs attest to her rich relationship with the style. Downs's virtuosic, versatile singing evokes the classical *ranchera* performances of the early 1940s. This, combined with her profound investment in affective spectacle reminiscent of Vargas' approach, demonstrates how her singing pays tribute to the *ranchera* as well as its transgressive representatives.

In addition to the idiosyncrasies of her soprano style that recalls Reyes and Vargas, Downs is representative of the *ranchera* in another manner: as a musical advocate and as a cultural translator. Her performative impact thus lies quite powerfully not only onstage, but in her constant interaction with media and publics, particularly those not familiar with traditional Mexican music, about her art form. Downs foregrounds the culture of the *ranchera* in interviews, concerts, and CD liner notes. Her articulation of the performance yields philosophical ruminations on the process and origins of *sentimiento*. I wish to slightly expand on Downs' particular contribution, for her signature making of *sentimiento* is intertwined with the display of knowledge and authority over the subject. Consider the following quote, which outlines a bodily-cultural epistemology of *sentimiento* she often mentions and has become, somehow, an irreplaceable part of her performance:

The *ranchera*...you have to really be honest and you have to be tuned into something that is hurting inside, something that maybe is crying for all of us in some way, for those who can't cry...it's about being truthful and honest, I don't

think...many people have sung *rancheras* and like my mother used to tell me when I was little, well you sing very pretty, but that's not how you sing a *ranchera*, you have to give it *las tripas* [the gut], like we say in Spanish, you have to give it your stomach, the grit, it's got to be from the inside.⁴²

Downs provides an array of insights on what constitutes the uniqueness and legitimacy of the *ranchera*, including the acknowledgement of the value of sincerity grounded in social responsibility (“for those who can’t cry”) and an involved physicality founded in the gut. Let me first address the question of honesty which Downs eloquently describes as a moral ability and obligation in song, a point I frame here as an aesthetic: how may we understand the theatricality of sincerity? The serious pondering of being truthful is necessary here despite its easy dismissal in the context of performance due to its relationship to the traditional notion of interiority and subjectivity. That is, honesty may be understood as an action, a mode that functions in performance and not a condition antithetical to it, a “‘doing’ instead of a ‘being’” (Bal and van Alphen 3). As literary analysts Ernst van Alphen and Mieke Bal explain “...sincerity cannot be dismissed because, while not an integrated consequence and qualification of subjectivity it is an indispensable *affective* (hence, social) process between subjects...” (5, emphasis in original). If we establish sincerity as a fundamental aspect of the social realm rather than a consequence of interiority, we can appreciate *sentimiento* as a communicative effect between and amongst singers and listeners. Akin to the notion of willing suspension of disbelief, *sentimiento* may

⁴² I extract this statement from a video-recorded interview with Downs on the occasion of her participation in the 2007 Womadelaide Australian world music festival. Accessed 1 Dec. 2011 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RDS04Foa_c>

provoke the activation, as I mentioned in the Introduction, of belief in hope, in transformation in community, in the renewal of the self, particularly when despair, disappointment, betrayal, and a general sense of futility and banality overwhelm life. *Sentimiento* facilitates the viewing and the hearing of sincerity encountered amidst the cynical moments of the everyday. The demand for honesty is linked to a secular need to believe in the performance as well as believing in its transformative power. Honesty (registered by *las tripas*), is thus not merely an ephemeral act of performance, but an enduring value that Downs lays claim to it as knowledge.

The anatomical location of sincerity's theatricality is also important and tied to the process of sincerity. The notion of *las tripas* (the gut) suggests that the location of *sentimiento*'s theatricality lies not only in the vocal apparatus but in the gastro intestinal zone as well.⁴³ The gut is both a literal and metaphorical site from where sound emanates and where meaning is negotiated. Downs' description of the stomach implies the gastro-intestinal and laryngeal systems as imagery helpful to theorize the vivification of emotion. While the lungs fill with air, the core's strength pushes it out, rendering intelligible words and yielding a sound that feels and sounds true. Beyond referencing the physical, Downs' explanation yields a metaphor of fortitude and tenacity, a will to overcome, or "grit": a subjectivity of struggle. However, the metaphor may be swapped for a synecdoche: her comment points at an epistemology of singing and *sentimiento* that includes embodied manipulation and memory entwined in the process of song, in active listening, and in mediation. In mentioning this last point, I wish to reiterate sincerity in *sentimiento* as a media effect. The term media effect proposed by val Alphen and Bal underlines how media plays an important role in the circulation and transmission of affective

⁴³ Such reference to the visceral body, which does not necessarily point to soul and interiority, recalls Performance Theorist Richard Schechner's theorizations of Rasa and its aesthetics (2001).

intensities (5). This proposition is in tune with my contention that *sentimiento* is in great part produced by media technologies and the framing of artist in film, records, interviews, and other manners of representation.

We arrive at a point, then, where the conjoining of these women's styles yields a (contradictory) common pattern in what *sentimiento* encompasses as my interpretation suggest and, in the case of Vargas and Downs, their own reflections attest: tribute, belief, honesty, and hope and, to a certain extent, the diminishing of the technical. The overwhelming resonance here also points to a tension between what is discernible and what is ineffable about *sentimiento*. Yet, both the latter and former possibilities suggest how *sentimiento* approximates the utopian performative. This notion by Jill Dolan denotes the brief yet powerful moment "in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking and inter-subjectively intense" (5). Each performer engages *sentimiento* to accommodate an inclusive vision and a transgressive spirit that insisted, and insists, on changing ways of feeling and being. They transform notions and beliefs (on Nation, on womanhood, on truth, etc) so rehearsed that desensitize, so imposed that cease to hail anyone, by acknowledging the currency of emotivity and challenging the limits of its expression.

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