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Arturo Ripstein's and Paz Alicia Garciadiego's *Lucha Reyes* and the aesthetics of Mexican abjection

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Mexican Abjection: Lucha Reyes and the Politics of Suffering in *La reina de la noche* (1994)

Sergio de la Mora

I clearly remember how stunned *La reina de la noche*/*The Queen of the Night* (1994) left audiences when it screened at the Muestra de Cine Mexicano in Guadalajara (now the Festival Internacional de Cine en Guadalajara [Guadalajara Film Festival]). Why would Arturo Ripstein portray Lucha Reyes (1906–1944), the fierce pioneer of the *canción ranchera*/folk music widely associated with mariachi, and native of Guadalajara, as such a pathetic victim and loser, as a desperately insecure woman who rarely stands up for herself and lets her mother and husband disrespect her continually? By and large, she is rendered in this film as the polar opposite of the fierce, idiosyncratic, and impassioned performative style, alternately festive and prickly, that is captured in her numerous recordings, live performances, and her eight credited cinematic roles. My queer reading of *La reina de la noche*, one of Ripstein's least studied and least known films, aims to offer a critical assessment of the combustible treatment of Reyes as a queer icon. My intention here is to focus

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on the film's reception and in particular to examine the ideological politics underpinning Ripstein's auteur-centered, somewhat conservative, neo-nationalist appropriation of this performer with my own feminist and queer revisionist reading of her life and work. From the outset, I want to make clear that I have "issues" with the film and that these problems are legitimate in light of the "mixed" legacy of Reyes—that is, her contested place in Mexico's post-revolutionary cultural and gender histories. My analysis highlights the multiple layers of ambiguity that rendered the film so problematic for critics and audiences in Mexico. Simultaneously, I also address how the film underscores the queer and anti-patriarchal edge of official cultural nationalism. To a certain degree, I (re-)read Reyes through Ripstein in order to claim that what is at stake in recuperating Ripstein and screenwriter Paz Alicia Garciadiego's queer rendition of this cultural icon as a radical proposal that is (somewhat) tempered by their otherwise sordid and disempowering portrayal of this untamed trailblazer. Reyes is an enormously important performer on both sides of the Mexico-US border who until recently has been curiously neglected. To a great degree, thanks to this film and to the promotion of Reyes's body of work and biography through artists like Astrid Hadad and Alma Velasco, as well as various academics, Reyes is now better known.¹

While Garciadiego's script is indeed relentlessly depressing, *La reina* would, of course, not be a Ripstein film if it were not a feel-bad movie. In fact, one goes to a Ripstein film expecting and wanting to feel sorrow deeply and, in general, to feel intensely. The excess of emotions and iconoclastic treatment of patriarchal figures is what makes Ripstein's (anti-) melodramas or "melodrama hardcore" so unique and powerful. In the latter part of his career, and especially since teaming up with Garciadiego, the subjects of music and film music soundtracks play a more prominent role, thus bringing the *melos* into alignment with the drama. In fact, I would argue that music plays a pivotal role since their first collaboration in *El imperio de la fortuna* (1986), where the two generations of female leads play *cantantes de feria*. *La reina de la noche* tells a story of operatic and tragic dimensions, whose climax

¹For an excellent analysis of the ways, the cabaret performer Astrid Hadad engages with Reyes's legacy, see Laura Gutiérrez, *Performing Mexicanidad*. Two dissertations that take up Reyes are: Antonia García Orozco (2005) and Lorena Alvarado (2012). Perhaps, the best biographical information about the singer was compiled by scholar Agustín Gurza.

features Puccini's "Un bel di" aria from *Madama Butterfly*, on the music soundtrack, thereby establishing a parallel fate for the movie's female lead. Both protagonists commit suicide for reasons related to love and betrayal. The operatic trope is a filter through which to read the logic of staging Reyes's career and to inscribe a queer sensibility. It is used to register Reyes's early musical history since she performed zarzuela, operetta, arias, and *teatro de revista* (musical theater mixed with comic political sketches). Opera is also used to register the film's tragic and melodramatic dimensions.

REVISITING MEXICANIDAD IN THE NEOLIBERAL ERA

This biopic focuses on the trials, tribulations, and eventual suicide of the woman known as "*la reina del mariachi*"/"the queen of mariachi." It was made to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the death of the legendary but oddly marginalized matriarch of ranchera music. The highly anticipated film opened in Mexico City in July 1995 to controversy, just fifty years and a month after Reyes's death. Mexican audiences held the filmmakers accountable to fans of the deceased performer. Reyes was the first woman to successfully lead a mariachi group. Her recordings internationalized mariachi music. She successfully confronted a male-dominated industry head-on, taking on a musical genre known for its masculine vigor. The spirited genre suited her temperament. She introduced an aggressive and defiant style of singing known as "*estilo bravío*"/"bold style" and "*canción bravía*"/"bold song" that, according to musicologist Antonia García Orozco, is a style of performance style by women who articulated a feminist critique.² The *estilo bravío* established a precedent for the performance of ranchera music, transforming how both women and men performed the genre. According to her biographer Alma Velasco, Reyes single-handedly "inventó el género del mariachi tal y como lo conocemos en la actualidad"/"invented the genre of the mariachi as we know it today."³ However, Reyes is also a contested figure for various reasons: for committing suicide (Mexico is, after all, a Catholic country), for singing about topics thought to be inappropriate for a proper woman, for drinking in public when it was

²García Orozco, "Cucurrucucu Palomas."

³Velasco, *Me llaman la Tequilera*.

uncommon for a woman to do so, and for being a sexually liberated woman.

It is widely known that Ripstein is held in higher regard by audiences outside of Mexico; his films frequently premiere abroad before they do in Mexico and they are also more commercially successful outside of Mexico. Ripstein's relationship with Mexican spectators is combustible because he takes on time-honored subjects and iconic national figures. In his review of the film, Jorge Ayala Blanco writes that the film exudes *malinchismo*—a disdain for all things Mexican and a preference for the foreign—here sonically emblemized through the prominent use of Italian opera rather than folkloric popular music such as rancheras; however, composer Lucía Álvarez's melodious strings and wind-based score are the basis of the traditional melodramatic musical soundtrack befitting this portrait of the demise of a notorious yet nearly forgotten musical pioneer. The mixed reception of Ripstein's eighteenth narrative feature was to be expected since he has a fraught relationship with Mexican film spectators, notably since the late 1980s when he seems to have fallen out of favor with home audiences. Upon the film's release in the summer of 1995, Mexican critics and audiences balked at the Ripsteinian degradation that colors *La reina de la noche*. In this demi-monde, Lucha Reyes is almost exclusively a tragic figure were it not for this character's passionate and spunky side that is placed center-stage at the film's beginning. Reyes was the most popular ranchera singer of her day. Yet, one would never know this from the film as it focuses on her private life rather than her spectacular career in radio, the recording industry, film, and musical theater. She was also the first ranchera singer to be accompanied by a mariachi featuring trumpets (traditionally the mariachi ensemble did not include wind instruments).⁴

La reina de la noche is the only feature film to date that is loosely based on the life of this influential performer. The problematic—and therefore all the more compelling—representation of Reyes raises important issues about what is at stake in taking up the biography of a revered national icon, in particular one so central to the construction of Mexican musical modernity. In a nutshell, the film was lambasted in Mexico largely because Ripstein was accused of denigrating a national icon and he was critiqued for making an overly melodramatic, theatrical,

⁴See Agustín Guerezpe and Arturo Rodríguez, "Hicieron Historia."

and grotesque film. Audiences found it particularly offensive that she was portrayed as patently queer, with Reyes notoriously rendered as having a weakness for both men and women. Outside of Mexico, the film received more favorable reviews and was praised for its tragic tenor and histrionic performances. It received acting awards at the Havana Film Festival and was the first Mexican film in twenty years to participate in the main competition at the Cannes Film Festival. The film also won six Ariel awards, including best actress for Patricia Reyes Spíndola and best supporting actress for Ana Ofelia Murgía, in their respective roles of daughter and mother.

La reina de la noche is the polar opposite in tone and rhythm of *Como agua para chocolate/Like Water for Chocolate* (Arau, 1991), the most commercially successful film of the pivotal 1988–1994 period when the Mexican film industry was reorganized and privatized. *La reina de la noche*, a Mexican-French-US co-production, had the highest budget of all the films funded by IMCINE (the Mexican Film Institute) during this period, close to three million dollars. The film is prefaced with text on a black screen after the opening credits but before the establishing shot of Reyes sitting alone on a stage as being “based on the imaginary and sentimental life of Lucha Reyes.” By prefacing the film as “imaginary,” Garciadiego distances this celluloid woman from the real Lucha Reyes and notions of biographical authenticity while the focus on her “sentimental life” explains the emphasis on affect rather than on Reyes’s career. Others have taken issue with this preface. Naief Yehya states that when a filmmaker takes on a biographical subject, they are accountable for the liberty the filmmakers take in telling the life of a person despite the “imaginary” disclaimer through which the film both does and does not want to be confused with the real Lucha Reyes: “No me parece válido utilizarla como gancho referencial para vender un melodramón tremendista o para subvertir, a la antigüita, por medio de la provocación y desmistificación, a una heroína popular”/“I don’t think it is valid to use Reyes as bait for a grotesque melodrama or to subvert, old school style, through provocation and demythification, a heroine belonging to the popular classes.”⁵ There is an implicit class critique in Yehya’s review that should be heard. The implied accusation is that Garciadiego and Ripstein are slumming with the poor and disrespecting a performer held

⁵Yehya, “La reina.”

in high esteem by the popular classes. Yehya for instance characterizes the dialogue dismissively as “la poética de la pacotilla que se quiere pasar como habla popular, por los diálogos tiesos y burdamente folcloroides/A shoddy linguistic poetics that attempts to pass for popular speech but is instead full of stiff dialogue that clumsily wants to pass for authentic.”⁶ This raises important questions about how Ripstein and Garciadiego are positioned as outsiders-within in relation to “authentic” Mexican popular culture, popular in the sense that the expression *clases populares* has in Spanish. Perhaps Ripstein’s background as outsider-within as a Mexican Jew is partially what enables his dark vision of Mexican culture? Garciadiego is also accused of having done shoddy research in relation to their subject matter as the film for its critics lacks credibility given that it does not stick to biographical “facts” or to what a more dignified biopic would be. Yehya calls the film’s biographical premise a “canallada/dirty trick.” Indeed, I would argue that audiences were probably most shocked and upset at seeing Reyes portrayed as a bisexual “libertine” and that this, together with her alcoholism, dishonors her.

Both *Como agua para chocolate* and *La reina de la noche* directly and indirectly trade on conventions of *mexicanidad* (Mexican national identity) founded on the centrality of the nation’s culinary tradition in the first film and on an emphasis on musical vernacular and the *china poblana* icon (the female counterpart to the *charro*) in the second film.⁷ Both share a concern for motherhood, womanhood, and tradition as anchors for engaging with feminine embodiments of the national. Reyes is famous for wearing folkloric costumes when performing; some say that she is the first female performer to wear charro pants.⁸ The charro outfit was an accouterment of her masculinity, her public image as a *mujer bronca*, *mujer rejega*, a tough and untamed woman. Both films also draw from Mexico’s rich melodramatic tradition and are in conversation with specific Mexican film genres (the family melodrama, the revolution), narratives, icons, and sounds linked to the golden age of both film and radio—in this case, the aesthetics associated with *ranchera* music (*mariachi*, *tequila*, *cantina*, *charros*, bearing one’s soul) and, to a lesser

⁶Ibid.

⁷An overview of the figure of the *china poblana* can be consulted in the articles and images collected in *Artes de México*, number 66.

⁸According to Deborah Vargas, the Chicana performer Rita Vidaurri claimed that Lucha Reyes was the first to wear a charro outfit. See Vargas, “Rita’s Pants”.

degree, the prostitution melodrama. However, *La reina de la noche* differs from *Como agua para chocolate* in that it does not vindicate the family and motherhood, the moral tenets of Mexican melodrama. Instead, like the two other films in this suicide trilogy (preceded by *La mujer del puerto* (1991) and *Principio y fin* (1993)), *La reina de la noche* revisits the national melodrama in order to demolish it. Ripstein's critical and anti-foundational position in the face of the conservative ideology of golden age family melodrama is a central preoccupation of this auteur since as far back as his breakthrough film *El castillo de la pureza/The Castle of Purity* (1972), a scathing critique of authoritarian patriarchy that rewrites the classic *Una familia de tantas/One Family of Many* (Galindo, 1948).⁹

THE (MIS)ADVENTURES OF THE QUEEN OF MARIACHI

Paulo Antonio Paranaguá (1997) draws our attention to the fact that this film is an unusual biopic because it builds on just a handful of anecdotes drawn from what is known and speculated about Reyes's life and career. The plot hinges on the fact that she committed suicide and in fact Garciadiego and Ripstein's interest in the project stemmed from this morbid yet compelling fact. I analyze the suicide sequence in detail later, as this suicide is shot in operatic dimensions to its full dramatic effect. The chronological focus is limited to three periods in her life and career—1939, 1941, and 1944—the years when in real life her career was at its peak (Garciadiego's screenplay opens in 1927 Berlin, during Reyes's infamous German tour with Cuarteto Anáhuac but the Berlin sequence was never filmed). The setting is a cosmopolitan Mexico City thriving with cabarets and brothels, bohemians, artists, politicians, leftists, and foreigners in a dynamic and decadent atmosphere reminiscent of Berlin during the Weimar period. The film's polyvalent title (The Queen of the Night) suggests, through the prism of high culture, Mozart's Queen of the Night character from his opera *The Magic Flute* that has produced famed performances of tour de force *coloratura* singing (vocal ornamentation) in the notoriously demanding aria. On a more popular level, the title evokes a nocturnal bohemian culture with which Reyes is

⁹For a comparative analysis of these two films, see Andrea Noble's chapter "Melodrama, Masculinity and the Politics of Space," in *Mexican National Cinema*, 95–122.

associated; additionally, Reyes was called the queen of mariachi. The film was shot almost entirely on location and is set mostly in the evenings.

Born María de la Luz Flores Aceves in 1906 in Guadalajara, her family (older brother Rafael and unwed mother Victoria Aceves Orozco) moves to Mexico City. She makes her professional debut in 1919, winning a singing contest at a *carpa* (tented) theater at Plaza San Sebastián in revolutionary-era Mexico City. In the early 1920s (either 1921 or 1923 depending on reports), around age 15, she moves to Los Angeles, after reportedly being contracted by the well-known Spanish theater actor Romualdo Tirado, where she is billed as the “world’s youngest singer.”¹⁰ Many say she moved to Los Angeles to flee her mother, with whom she did not get along. It is said that she married journalist, playwright, and composer Gabriel Navarro who wrote for the Los Angeles Spanish-language dailies *El Heraldo de México* and *La Opinión*. The marriage did not last, and during this period Reyes has a miscarriage after being beaten, presumably by Navarro, that left her unable to bear children.¹¹ Reyes returns to Mexico City and triumphs with performances at the leading theaters of the time (Politeama, Teatro Esperanza Iris), in popular variety shows known as *teatro de revista*. In 1927, she is hired to tour Germany, as part of Cuarteto Anáhuac directed by the prominent orchestra director Juan Nepomuceno Torreblanca. It is said not only that the tour was not a success but also that the group disbanded in Germany and that Reyes was left there, destitute and without resources to return home. During this European period, she loses her voice for a prolonged period of time. Legend has it that when she regains her voice it is harsh and “broken,” and so she is pushed to leave behind operetta to focus exclusively on vernacular music. She reappears in the Mexican press

¹⁰See Agustín Guerezpe and Arturo Rodríguez, “Hicieron Historia.” Velasco mentions that a Mr. Trallis (page 89) secured employment for Reyes in Los Angeles’ thriving Spanish-language musical theater scene. The earliest documentation in the press that I have found about Reyes’s sojourn in LA is dated from 1924. The earliest documentation of Reyes crossing the border from the US Department of Labor, Immigration Service, Mexican Border District is dated October 22, 1923 where she entered through Calexico. She is registered as María de la Luz Reyes. This document lists her age as 19 and also indicates that this is not her first time in the United States. Her occupation is listed as “artist.” She was accompanied on this trip by José Castro. I thank Dr. John Koegel for sharing this invaluable documentation with me.

¹¹Reyes’s great-niece Yolanda Sánchez Reyes makes the statement that Reyes was beaten by her partner. See “Testimonio,” *La Jornada*, July 17, 1994, p. 24.

by 1930 performing with the Trío Garnica Ascencio, then Trovadores Tapatíos with José “Pepe” Gutiérrez, and finally as a soloist by 1933. Her ascent as the leading exponent of a new style of ranchera singing (*canción bravía*) in the late 1930s coincides with the institutionalization of *charrería* (Mexican rodeo) as the foremost expression of *mexicanidad* in mass culture. She makes her first appearance in film in 1937 in *Canción del alma/Song of the Soul* (Urueta, 1937) where she performs “La mujer rejega,” followed in 1938 by *La tierra del mariachi/The Land of Mariachi* (de Anda, 1938), where she performs “Estás como rifle” accompanied by the now famous Mariachi Vargas de Tecalitlán. Reyes makes her film debut in 1939, playing the resourceful soldadera Adela in *Con los Dorados de Villa/With Villa’s Veterans* (de Anda, 1939) starring Pedro Armendáriz, a high-profile film that did well at the box office, especially in the United States.¹² In 1940, she plays the cantina girl “La Nena” in *El Zorro de Jalisco/The Zorro from Jalisco* (Benavides, 1940), where she performs “Pienso en ti,” her only *bolero* on film. She performs in the comedia ranchera blockbuster *¡Ay Jalisco no te rajes!/Don’t Back Down Jalisco!* (Rodríguez, 1941), in which she sings the title song that became a raging hit, both her version and that of her co-star Jorge Negrete. In 1942, she headlines the medium-length film homage, *¡Qué rechulo es mi tarzán!* (Liszt, 1942), which banks on her popularity and references the title of one of her most popular songs; this film apparently no longer exists, as I have been unable to locate it. Her final screen appearance is in Emilio Fernández’s revolutionary melodrama *Flor Silvestre/Wild Flower* (1943), where she performs the song “El Herradero.” She dies on June 25, 1944 at the age of 38 from an overdose of barbiturates, leaving behind her adopted daughter María de la Luz Cervantes Flores and her mother Victoria Aceves. Her daughter María de la Luz had disappeared from the public eye but resurfaced again when her granddaughter contacted Alberto Moreno, who created and ran the Lucha Reyes Blogspot.

Curiously for a film about a performer, *La Reina* includes very few musical sequences and only a trio of the songs made famous by Reyes, performed here by the blues-jazz singer Betsy Pecanins and lip-synched

¹²See Gómez Gómez, “Lucha Reyes.”

by actor Patricia Reyes Spíndola who plays the lead role.¹³ Three songs from Reyes's repertoire are included: "Por un amor," "Los Tarzanes," and "La Tequilera." Pecanins's voice does not match Reyes's voice in timbre or vibrato, creating an effect of dissonance. Also, those familiar with Reyes Spíndola's work know that she doesn't sing, so it is somewhat jarring to see her lip-synching Reyes's repertoire. Nor does the film include references to Reyes's career in film. Most notable is the glaring absence of sufficient context indicating Reyes' tremendous national and international success, or why she achieved legendary status—except for a brief mention made by a supporting character, Oñate, played by Arturo Alegro, who is supposed to be the painter Diego Rivera, three abbreviated performances in small nightclubs, a dress rehearsal at a large, empty theater and the announcement of an imminent engagement at the XEW radio station, the leading Spanish-language radio broadcaster in the Americas, known as "la catedral de la radio."¹⁴ The filmmakers choose instead to focus on rendering Reyes as a failure, a broken and pathetic woman crippled by her obsessive love and insecurities.

La reina de la noche traces the progressively self-destructive and abject existence of Reyes through her relationships with perhaps the three most important people in her life: her controlling mother, Doña Victoria (Ana Ofelia Murguía); her longtime best friend, the sultry La Jaira (modeled after the Mexican singer-actress Nancy Torres "la Potranquita" [the Mare], played by Blanca Guerra); and the man who has gone down in history as the love of her life, her manager and husband, the entrepreneur Félix "El Negro" Martín Cervantes, renamed Pedro Calderón (Alberto Estrella) in the film, who in real life was a powerful entertainment entrepreneur who went on to become the co-proprietor with Margo Su of the famous Teatro Blanquita

¹³The film's original music was scored by Lucía Álvarez, who composes for Ripstein regularly. Pecanins performs six songs composed by Álvarez with lyrics by Paz Alicia Garciadiego. These performances are powerful, particularly "Acaso," whose melody is the film's main musical theme and is played during the opening and closing credits. According to the film's producer, Jean-Michel Lacor, they conducted a voice casting. They were looking for "una voz que no sea nasal, que venga de las tripas, de adentro, como las cantantes de ópera, que era de donde venía la potencia de la voz de Lucha."// "a voice that isn't nasal, that comes from within, from the belly, like that of oper singers, as that was what made Lucha's voice powerful." Quoted in Torres, "Lucha Reyes."

¹⁴See the history compiled by Jesús Flores y Escalante, "XEW La catedral."

in downtown Mexico City; Cervantes was allegedly involved in the underground economy of drugs. All three characters betray her, including her mother who pushes her to commit suicide, arguing that she is fated to suffer and is thus better off dead. “Tú no naciste para ser feliz, eso es para otros. Así es y así va ser. Hasta cuando vas a seguir rajándote? Haz lo que tienes que hacer”/“You weren’t born to be happy, that’s for others, and that’s how it’s going to be. How much longer are you going to continue torturing yourself? Do what you have to do.” Critics repeatedly objected to the degrees of torment to which the filmmakers subject Reyes: betrayals, conflicts with her mother, depression, and alcoholism. This accumulation of tragedy translates onscreen in the form of relentless punishment. Poor Luz Flores Ascencio aka Lucha Reyes merits little happiness, as seen through this dark Judeo-Christian lens.

To be fair, Ripstein-Garciadiego grant Reyes a moment of true glory and honor in the sequence when she stands up to a homophobic politician, “El Gato” Linares (Guillermo Gil), who, pointing a gun to her head, demands that she stop her performance of one of her most emblematic songs, “Los tarzanes”/“The Pachucos”—a singular song about generational differences expressed with wit and verve a mother-daughter conversation about the pros and cons of the working-class dandy zoot-suiter who is the daughter’s object of desire—because he says that it is a song for fairies. She fearlessly refuses to be intimidated by the thug and continues to sing until he backs off. Her transgressive acts and lifestyle (operating in a “man’s world” and breaking multiple social mores) make her a figure that is a model for others even though this was probably not Garciadiego and Ripstein’s intention. This anti-homophobic stance is unusual in a film that refuses to be nostalgic about Mexico’s golden age. Previously, only Paul Leduc’s biographical film about Frida Kahlo, *Frida, naturaleza viva/Frida Still Life* (1983), ventures as far as *La reina de la noche* in its depiction of lesbianism during this fabled period of Mexican cultural history.

Queering La Mujer Rejega

The film’s queer content is also notable for including a sequence representing, out of historical context, a nocturnal party at the home of Carlos Balmori (aka Concepción Jurado, played by Marta Aura), a famous transgender figure in Mexico City, who, between 1926 and

1931, when she was in her 60s hosted notorious parties up to three times a week according to historian Gabriela Cano.¹⁵

This much we know to be true: By the end of the film, Reyes is dead and the way the narrative builds up to his moment makes her suicide into this character's *raison d'être*. Her suicide is depicted through a romantic lens because of the diegetic use of the aria "Un bel di" from *Madama Butterfly* that Doña Victoria listens to on the radio in the next room, where she can hear her daughter dying. In the film, the mother wants the daughter to be an opera singer. Puccini's famed aria registers what Catherine Clément famously coined as the "undoing of women," where the leading women of the most famous nineteenth-century operas are punished for their transgressions; "transgressions of familial rules, political rules, the things at stake in sexual and authoritarian power."¹⁶ Women are punished for failing to enact patriarchal scripts: "From the moment these women leave their familiar and ornamental function, they are to end up punished – fallen, abandoned, or dead."¹⁷ But the insidious nature of opera is that the music and singing through which the plot unfolds seduce the ear. Clément eloquently argues that opera is a "spectacle thought up to adore, and also to kill, the feminine character."¹⁸ Susan McClary notes in her forward to the English-language translation of Clément's book translation that opera is "an art form that demands the submission or death of the woman for the sake of narrative closure."¹⁹ Clément further notes how seductive it is to be swept up by the beauty of the operatic music that punishes transgressive women; she points out how opera is especially seductive when you do not know the language in which the opera is sung. The audience is not held accountable for loving being transported by the operatic drama. Using Clément's lens to analyze the film's portrayal of Lucha Reyes, we could say that she acts like a man, refuses to be contained, and, thus, that she deserves to die. Reyes is one such transgressive woman but she is not an uncomplicated model of female desire.

Lucha Reyes challenges the conventions of Mexican feminine beauty. Reyes was a taller-than-average woman, as can be seen in her film appearances and in photographs of her and her singing partner José "Pepe"

¹⁵Cano, "Noches púrpuras."

¹⁶Clément, *Opera*, 10.

¹⁷Ibid., 7.

¹⁸Ibid., 6.

¹⁹In Clément, *Opera*, xi.

Gutiérrez. She was somewhat masculine, if not androgynous, in a number of ways; she was big-boned, big hips, her voice was husky and she sang at the top of her voice as if she was really pissed off. She had to fend for herself from an early age. In her youth, Reyes worked in a cardboard factory until she won a singing contest in 1919 that included as part of the prize a six-month singing contract at the *carpa* Salón Variedades.²⁰ There, she performed between boxing matches.²¹ The rumors of Reyes's affairs with women begin after she meets Nancy Torres, a woman of uncommon beauty, also famous for allegedly not wearing underwear in those days.²² Reyes's often over-the-top performances queer ranchera music. Her potent and impassioned style of singing and lyrical interpretation embodied a range of rage, pain, desire, joy, and national pride, defying gender conventions and heteronormative norms, despite expressing this through songs composed by men, such as "Cuquita," "La Panchita," and "El tecolote." These songs queered the canción ranchera through their *picardía* (ribaldry).

However, much of the press is dead-set on believing that, in the words of the film's late producer and founder of the Mexico City-based production company Ultra Films, Jean-Michel Lacor, she was "incapable of being happy": "Es uno de los destinos como Judy Garland, Edith Piaf o Janis Joplin, estas mujeres que se autodestruyen, que no pueden ser felices... Era una tipa muy frágil, incapaz de ser feliz, celosísima, insegura"/"Her destiny was like that of Judy Garland, Edith Piaf, and Janis Joplin, women who destroyed themselves, who were not able to be happy... She was a very fragile dame, very jealous and insecure."²³

RECEPTION AT HOME AND ABROAD

The film did not leave audiences indifferent. Paranaguá argues that *La reina de la noche*:

es la puesta en escena más brillante de Ripstein, por el dominio de sus opciones estilísticas, capaces de transformar un melodrama nocturno y resplandeciente en sinónimo de modernidad... *La reina de la noche*

²⁰Velasco, 53.

²¹Ibid., 61–62.

²²Ibid., 75

²³Torres, "Lucha Reyes."

localiza la corrosión, la autodestrucción, en el mismo corazón de uno de los íconos de la mexicanidad. A escala humana, medidas con el tiempo de una vida, el estancamiento y el subdesarrollo no sugieren satisfacciones nacionalistas, sino toda clase de frustraciones./It is Ripstein's most brilliant staging, for the dominance of his stylistic options, capable of transforming a nocturnal melodrama into a resplendid synonym of modernity... *La reina de la noche* finds corrosion, self-destruction, in the very heart of one of the icons of the Mexican culture. On a human scale, measured over a lifetime, the stagnation and underdevelopment depicted do not suggest national satisfaction, but rather all kinds of frustrations.²⁴

Jorge Ayala Blanco, a detractor of Ripstein's films since the very public quarrel between them in the early 1980s, calls this film "su peor película de mediados de los noventa"/"his worst film of the mid-nineties" (363). He characterizes the film as "[un] producto ominoso de cinco sexenios de alfabetismo/malinchismo/autorracismo/corrupción de funcionarios filmicos, como todo el cine de Ripstein"/"an ominous product of five presidencies that have promoted illiteracy/*malinchismo*/self-directed racism/corruption of state officials in charge film, as is all of Ripstein's work."²⁵ Ayala Blanco calls to our attention the perception that Ripstein's projects have been privileged since he began making films in the mid-1960s because they have benefitted from government subsidies. His reference to *malinchismo* (national or ethnic self-hatred) further highlights how loaded national icons can be and just why this film was so polemical.

Martha Zuk asks an usher why audiences leave the theater before the end of the film. The man taking the tickets tells her, blushing: "Pues es que... es de lesbianas y eso"/"Well it's because... it's about lesbians and that sort of thing."²⁶ After seeing the film, she notes regarding the sequences of erotic intimacy between the two leading females, or another sequence where Reyes picks up a young female sex worker:

ninguna de sus escenas de "amor" es explícita ni mucho menos grotesca o gruesa. Al contrario, están muy bien cuidadas, y además, son muy pocas. Por otro lado, la película está tan bien lograda en todos aspectos, que la verdad esas escenas (y las de amor heterosexual) son lo de menos, porque el resto de verdad vale muchísimo la pena ser visto./None of their "love"

²⁴Paranaguá, *Arturo Ripstein*, 253–254.

²⁵Ayala Blanco, *Fugacidad*, 365.

²⁶Zuk, "¿Por qué la gente...?"

scenes was explicit, let alone grotesque or sexually explicit. On the contrary, they are tastefully shot, and furthermore, there are very few. Also, the film is all around so well made in every aspect that, to tell the truth, those scenes (and those of heterosexual intercourse) are the least important part of it, because the rest of it is really worth watching.²⁷

Note that for the ticket taker the lesbian scenes elicited discomfort, whereas the reporter considers that the representations of hetero- and homo-sexuality were “bien cuidadas”/“shot tastefully.” Zuk, however, refrains from calling the erotic scenes between women “lesbian,” perhaps out of discretion, shame, or simply a refusal to label them.

In Susana López Aranda’s review, she praises Ripstein’s demolition of classic Mexican melodrama.

En este filme pues, Arturo Ripstein continúa explorando las entrañas del género cinematográfico nacional por antonomasia, pero su trabajo y el camino elegido, no se dirigen hacia la puesta al día, ni mucho menos hacia el homenaje nostálgico. En este su décimonoveno largometraje, Ripstein a través de la puesta en escena—expresión formal que en *La reina de la noche* alcanza una depuración y un rigor totales—e termina por hacer volar los cimientos tradicionales del género, para reconstruirlo y recrearlo desde una perspectiva opuesta y perfectamente personal./In this film, Arturo Ripstein continues to explore the depths of the national cinematic genre par excellence. But his work and the direction he chose do not aim to update the genre, much less render a nostalgic homage. In this, his nineteenth feature-length film, Ripstein, through his *mise-en-scène*—which in *La reina de la noche* reaches a maximal formal purity and rigor—blows up the traditional foundation of the genre in order to reconstruct and recreate it from an opposite and perfectly personal perspective.²⁸

López Aranda highlights Ripstein’s iconoclastic treatment of Reyes, praises his stylistic choices, and admires his qualities as auteur and his dialogue with, and subversion of, Mexican melodrama. This Ripstein-Garciadiego neo-melodrama launches a serious assault on nation, patriarchy, and church.²⁹

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ López Aranda, “La reina,” 29.

²⁹ López Aranda, “Filmar el tiempo. ... Primera Parte.”

Susana Cato addresses the difficulty of dislodging the real Lucha Reyes from her “imaginary” counterpart:

Hay algo que no embona. Es como si a un rostro bellísimo no le quedara la peluca. Es quizá el tono lúgubre...que sería perfecto si se hablara de una cantante cualquiera hundida en la miseria...O tal vez la necesidad de acordarse de Lucha Reyes—como un ser intenso y rasposo que lo mismo lloraba que reía a carcajadas—aunque Lucha Reyes no es la que está en la pantalla. O porque para un mexicano es difícil ir a ver una película de Lucha Reyes que no trata sobre ella, a pesar de que sus creadores lo han advertido a los cuatro vientos...Tal vez porque hacía falta haber mostrado los altibajos de Lucha, el esplendor que necesita toda reina. /There is something that doesn't fit. It's as if a wig didn't fit a beautiful face. Perhaps it's the somber tone... which would fit perfectly if we were talking about an ordinary singer sunken in misery... Or perhaps it's the necessity to remember Lucha Reyes as an intense and abrasive woman who cried just as easily as she roared with laughter even though Lucha Reyes is not the person we are watching on screen. Perhaps it is difficult for a Mexican to see a Lucha Reyes film that isn't about her, despite the fact that its creators have continually proclaimed as much... Perhaps it was necessary to show Lucha's ups and downs, the splendor that every queen needs.³⁰

In her biographical novel, *Me llaman La Tequilera/They Call Me La Tequilera* (2012), Alma Velasco, a music conservatory-trained mezzo soprano, underscores throughout that Reyes could not possibly have been so miserable. Velasco claims that “she had to have felt happiness when she was performing.”³¹ The crux of her novel hinges on rewriting Reyes's life history as one much more well-rounded and populated by nearly equal levels of joy and despair.

David Stratton wrote a glowing review for *Variety*, although he cautions that because the film is so “downbeat” it may have a limited audience: “Ripstein has created a fascinating portrait of a remarkable woman... It's a rigorous film that will prove a challenge for audiences and will be a tough sell.”³² Indeed, the film never secured commercial release in the United States, although it was shown on cable television

³⁰Cato, “La reina,” 71.

³¹Interview with the author, Mexico City, March 21, 2011. See Velasco.

³²Stratton, “The Queen.”

and, as with most of Ripstein's films since his post-classic period (post-1978), his audience in Mexico was limited. However, the film garnered significant interest in Europe, notably in France and Spain. In France, the film was selected for competition at the Cannes International Film Festival and it had a successful theatrical run in Paris.

In Chile, Carlos Salazar, a critic for the online newspaper *Primera línea*, argues that the film is unnecessarily depressing, boring, and overly sentimental.

[Está] Para verse con pañuelo en mano, los más sensibles, o con almohada, los más escépticos... El relato pasa de la pena a la angustia, y del dolor a la agonía, como yendo de la cama al *living*. Reto notable que a Ripstein le sale por la culata, porque nadie puede soportar una vida tan infeliz. / Sensitive audiences ought to see this with their handkerchiefs ready, while skeptics should bring their pillows...The narrative goes from suffering to anguish, and from pain to agony as if walking from the bed to the sofa This strategy backfires on Ripstein because no one can put up with such an unhappy life.³³

He does, however, praise Patricia Reyes Spíndola's acting as being among the film's saving graces. Others criticize this film for its melodramatic excess, even comparing it disparagingly to a telenovela. Yehya, for instance, calls Ripstein's films "hardcore melodramas" which he defines as "To call something the messy bloodshed of daily horrors with which he colors a story as trite as any romance by Corin Tellado"//“por decirle de algún modo al salpicadero de horrores cotidianos con que se colorea una historia tan rosa como la de cualquier novela de Corin Tellado.”³⁴

THE DARK SIDE OF THE *CHINA POBLANA*

La reina de la noche is unrelentingly grim, even during celebratory occasions, such as her impromptu mock wedding ceremony with Pedro Calderón that is officiated by a stand-in for Diego Rivera. Mirroring the title, dimly lit night sequences are predominant and are shot in lush

³³Notimex, "La reina."

³⁴In Yehya, "La reina."

brown and red earth shades by cinematographer Bruno de Keyser.³⁵ During the wedding sequence and knowing that she cannot bear Calderón any children, Reyes purchases a young girl from a beggar woman hanging out in the church with her two children, in an effort to be a “complete” woman to her husband. This is perhaps one of the most iconoclastic and “shocking” sequences of the film since the beggar woman pathetically insists right there in the colonial-era Catholic church that Reyes purchase both of her kids so that they do not get separated.

Ripstein and Garciadiego privilege composer Gilberto Parras’s now classic “Por un amor,” popularized by Reyes in the early 1940s. The song is performed twice in the film, at the beginning to accompany sequences from the height of her career and toward the end when her personal life is vertiginously spinning out of control in alcoholism and severe depression. The lyrics of this slow ranchera about the pain that love causes foreshadow her tragic death: “Esta vida mejor que se acabe no es para mí”/“It’s better to end my life, it wasn’t made for me.” The song parallels the depiction of Reyes’s life insofar as she is embittered because her fits of jealousy and insecurity cause irreparable damage to her marriage and increasingly push her husband away; this loss ultimately drives her to suicide. The second time Reyes is shown performing “Por un amor” is during a short two-minute sequence. The single long shot depicts her dressed in the typical *china poblana* outfit, a bottle of tequila in hand and sitting on a stool in the middle of a circle composed of mariachi musicians. Throughout the song, the camera is placed at a distance from Reyes and circles slowly, first left then right, almost 360° over the shoulders of the mariachi to emphasize her entrapment in a vicious cycle of jealousy, alcoholism, and abjection. Her posture is hunched, clearly pained, and defeated.

The film culminates with Reyes’s suicide in one of the most accomplished sequences—in both form and content as well as in dramatic punch—of Ripstein’s extensive *oeuvre*. The closing sequence is shot in a black-and-white tiled bathroom in her mother’s house where Reyes has locked herself up. This sequence is remarkable because it is one of only three sequences shot during the day and features the only close-up in the two-hour-long film. The costuming is also significant. Ironically dethroned, *la reina del mariachi* is dressed in her signature *china*

³⁵Keyser also shot ‘*Round Midnight*’ (Tavernier, 1986), the fictional film based on the career of two major jazz musicians, Lester Young and Bud Powell.

poblana outfit: A beautiful black skirt with a large national eagle holding a serpent in its beak and elaborately adorned with sequins, complimented by a white blouse; big, pretty bows adorn her long disheveled black hair. Dressed like this, she could come straight out of a Jesús Helguera calendar illustration, as has been noted by critics,³⁶ with the big difference that this *china poblana* is grim and completely abject, the stark opposite of the cheery and acquiescent female icon of Mexican folklore. This black angel, as her husband calls her, swigs from a bottle of tequila and harbors a serious death wish.

Reyes sends her adopted daughter Luzma (Alejandra Montoya) to purchase a bottle of barbiturates and more liquor. When she returns, Reyes takes the goods, pushes Luzma out of the house, notwithstanding her concerned protests, and locks herself in the bathroom. After emptying the deadly bottle of pills in her mouth and swallowing them with tequila, she smashes her records while, in the next room, her mother and daughter (who have entered the house when Doña Victoria returned from an errand) listen to a live broadcast of “Un bel di,” a twofold reminder of Reyes’s failure to become the opera singer her mother had hoped she would be and sonic symbol of her total loss of hope in love and life.³⁷ She is, after all, an obedient daughter since she follows her mother’s advice to end her life in what Doña Victoria sees as an act of euthanasia meant to spare her daughter from further suffering. Reyes begins to lose consciousness, curled up on the bathroom floor in an almost fetal position; the camera slowly tracks in for a close-up; the actor Reyes Spíndola covers her face with her hand in a small but symbolically important gesture of respect and dignity finally conferred to this woman who broke a number of taboos and introduced the assertive and impassioned *estilo bravío* to the ranchera genre. Critics objected to the use of opera because it added a “bombastic grandiloquence.” Naief Yehya writes,

Llama la atención en la cinta de Ripstein el desafortunado uso de la pista sonora en las últimas secuencias. Al inundar aquellas habitaciones ruinosas con ópera, el realizador vuelve a su manía bombástica, a la grandilocuencia

³⁶Cato, “La reina,” 70.

³⁷Jorge Miranda points out in his liner notes that Reyes apparently performed songs from *Madama Butterfly* as early as 1919. See Reyes, *Lucha Reyes*. Others also claim that she sang opera, including Puccini’s orientalist tragedy, during the European tour that was crucial for her career.

que desvía la atención del drama humano para conferirle una mañosa grandeza trágica. / The unfortunate use of the musical soundtrack is striking in Ripstein's film, especially in the last sequences. Inundating those rundown rooms with opera, the filmmaker returns to his bombastic mania and to the grandiloquence that diverts the attention from the human drama to confer a manipulative grandiosity to this tragedy.

The choice of Puccini's aria seems to be dictated by Ripstein's stated preference for opera over mariachi and by the thematic parallels between *Madama Butterfly* and Lucha Reyes's biography. She allegedly performed both from *Carmen* and *Madama Butterfly* in the early part of her career, before fully transitioning to ranchera music. Opera also serves to register a queer sensibility.

What do Ripstein and Garciadiego recuperate for Mexican cultural history and why do they return to this specific period in film production? *La reina de la noche* taps into the nostalgia for the golden age of Mexican cinema and popular culture that is one of the most pronounced characteristics of the "new cinema" that emerged in the 1990s. In *La reina de la noche, la mujer bravia*/bold woman is a sad, pathetic, and self-destructive masochist whose apparent reason for being is to be continually punished until she self-destructs. Ultimately, her telos is to commit suicide.³⁸ The film privileges her personal life over her public life. Her rumored same-sex attractions are featured prominently, which is in itself groundbreaking given the scarcity of lesbian representation in Mexican cinema. Reyes is portrayed as exasperatingly needy and dependent on her (ex-)husband for her happiness even when her girlfriend La Jaira is around and open to taking her mind off her grief. Ruby Rich notes that the unconsummated moments of on-screen passion occur between Reyes and La Jaira "but the camera is always positioned too far away for intimacy" (149).

Reyes' bisexuality is rendered in ways that are deeply problematic and troubling for audiences. Her mother, who repeatedly castigates her for engaging in sexual relations with women, easily manipulates her and demonizes her desire for women in spite of the fact that she carries on

³⁸In an interview, Garciadiego specifies that the seeds of the script were the scenes involving Lucha's suicide. In the same interview, Ripstein describes the film as being about "a self-fulfilled prophecy... It made no difference if it were Lucha Reyes or someone similar." In López Aranda, "Filmar el tiempo ... Segunda Parte," 11.

the practice of renting rooms to local prostitutes. Both Reyes and La Jaira are often labeled by Doña Victoria as *rajonas*, from the verb *rajar* to split open, which here denotes cowardliness and recalls Octavio Paz's often cited and problematic characterization of Mexican womanhood as the *chingada* and an abject figure of wounded suffering.³⁹ This abjection is echoed in Doña Victoria's naming of Reyes's desire for women *porquerías*/trash. Mexico's *reina del mariachi* is depicted as a woman out of control, who has overstepped numerous strictures and who ultimately needs to be controlled and punished for her transgressions.⁴⁰ The tragic register of the entire film highlights moments geared toward disciplining this unruly woman. Yet, as in most of Ripstein's work, the gray zone and the multiple layers of ambiguity also make this creative depiction of Reyes's life a critique of the patriarchal impetus of the

³⁹“The ill/evil is rooted in her very self [of the Mexican woman]; she is by nature a slashed, open being. Yet, owing to a compensatory mechanism that can easily be explained, her weakness becomes a virtue and she is transformed into the ‘long-suffering Mexican woman.’ The idol—ever vulnerable, ever on the cusp of becoming a human being—becomes a victim, but a hardened victim who is insensitive to suffering, hardened from suffering,” writes Paz in *El laberinto de la soledad*, 34. Paz's monstrosity, *La Chingada*, the violated mother, then becomes the symbol of abjection: “*La Chingada* is even more passive. Her passiveness is abject: she offers no resistance to violence, she is an inert mass of blood, bones, and dust,” in Paz, *El laberinto*, 77. Reyes is depicted as so pathetically victimized and so full of suffering that she repels spectators. Ripstein and Garciadiego's *Lucha Reyes* is not the mirror one would gaze at if looking for an affirming national icon.

“El mal radica en ella misma; por naturaleza es un ser ‘rajado,’ abierto. Mas, en virtud de un mecanismo de compensación fácilmente explicable, se hace virtud de flaqueza original y se crea el mito de la ‘sufrida mujer Mexicana.’ El ídolo—siempre vulnerable, siempre en trance se convertirse en un ser humano—se transforma en víctima, pero en víctima endurecida e insensible al sufrimiento, encallecida a fuerza de sufrir” (34). Paz's monstrosity, *La Chingada*, the violated mother, then becomes the symbol of abjection. “*La Chingada* es aún más pasiva. Su pasividad es abyecta: no ofrece resistencia a la violencia, es un montón inerte de sangre, huesos y polvo” (77). Reyes is depicted as so pathetically victimized and so full of suffering that she repels spectators. Ripstein and Garciadiego's *Lucha Reyes* is not the mirror one would gaze at if looking for an affirming national icon.

⁴⁰In the last quarter of the film, when Reyes and her husband Pedro Calderón have separated, Doña Victoria says to Pedro that her daughter is a “borracha y marimacha. ¿Quién la va a controlar?”/“*Lucha* is a drunk and a tomboy and likes women. Who is going to control her?” The answer to that question is that she can control *Lucha*. Not surprisingly, given the authority that mothers have over their children, particularly in Mexican culture, and in particular the constant, bitterly conflictive and destructive role that mother–children relationships have in Garciadiego's scripts.

cultural nationalism of the 1930s. The film is thus at the same time both anti-homophobic and homophobic, and so, all the more disturbing. In the problematic, ambiguous, and deeply contradictory impulses of *La reina de la noche* also lie its greatness, making it one of the most accomplished collaborations by the husband and wife team that has been called the most twisted couple in cinema. *La reina de la noche* is true to Ripstein's vision that art should be convulsive. This polemical film provoked visceral responses from critics and audiences alike. It contributed to the production of public discourse about Reyes. If the dark vision of this tormented and dysfunctional queen does not elicit in the audience the feeling of being deeply drawn to this "imaginary" woman and/or enjoin audiences to create another version of her, I do not know what would. Ripstein and Garciadiego recover Reyes as a queer figure whom they reactivate for new generations, rescuing her from oblivion. However, they render her such an ambiguous figure, both compelling and pathetic, that they incite polemics over the portrayal of queer historical figures.

For me, Reyes is a far more complicated and ambiguous woman than the character is imagined in *La reina de la noche*. As an interpreter of vernacular music, she expressed modern ways of being a woman, of challenging and expanding the boundaries of what constitutes appropriate gender behavior. Olga Nájera-Ramírez argues that "women have employed the ranchera to expand that which is deemed culturally appropriate for both men and women."⁴¹ Ranchera music thus becomes one of the dominant musical genres to access power and rewrite cultural scripts.

A CADA QUIÉN SU LUCHA

My tribute to Lucha Reyes is celebratory and emphasizes her pioneering struggles for women's self-representation within a male-dominated entertainment business and in a patriarchal and homophobic society. She carved spaces within popular culture to express women's concerns, affirmed women's agency, and elevated cultural forms and practices belonging to the *clases populares*, as well as articulated queer desires and pleasures. Her contributions to Mexican culture now occupy a central place in Mexican

⁴¹Nájera-Ramírez, "Unruly Passions," 205–206.

cultural nationalism. So, at its very core, official Mexican cultural nationalism has a queer and anti-patriarchal edge that occupies a contradictory and ambivalent space—both in opposition to and colluding with hegemonic culture, aspects that are powerfully articulated in *La reina de la noche*. In great part due to the innovations that Reyes brought about, her introduction of the *estilo bravío*, her queer sensibilities and the wildly different recuperations of her legacy by performers Astrid Hadad, Alma Velasco, the Garciadiego and Ripstein team, and others, I no longer listen to nor understand rancheras as the exclusive domain of male heterosexual privilege. I now understand that queerness is not absent from or marginal to *mexicanidad* and Mexico's classic period popular music, although in most music scholarship this still is the case. Anxieties arise when links between Reyes—or for that matter Pedro Infante—and queerness are drawn because she is an embodiment of virile nationalism and thus presumed to be heterosexual. A queer nationalism would, in a homophobic mentality, be considered not only negative and defective but also an oxymoron. Moreover, guarding secrets regarding non-traditional sexual practices is typical in a society conditioned by a homophobic culture (Hubbs, 133–134). At stake in queering, Reyes is my desire to chip away at homophobic intolerance. My interest in reclaiming what Ripstein once referred to in conversation with me as one of his “orphan films” (since even he, for the longest time, did not have a copy of it) is to selectively embrace his queer rendition of the queen of mariachi. Whereas by and large most critics and many audiences have rejected *La reina de la noche* as a demeaning representation of a revered cultural icon, I applaud the complex and highly ambiguous figuration of a woman who lived well ahead of her time but was trapped by competing obligations to her mother, to abusive partners, to a society that was uncomfortable with seeing and hearing a woman performer act on stage, perform on radio, and record, who operated outside of the conventional bounds of binary genders.

The life of Lucha Reyes has all the ingredients of a legend. Much of what is known about her life story is a mixture of fact and fiction. Biographical information is contradictory, and it seems that she actively contributed to this myth-making process by providing different versions of events and not correcting erroneous information circulating in the media. Since she left no successors in charge of her estate and because there is little documentation regarding many aspects of her life, it seems likely that painting a complete portrait of her life will continue to be a daunting challenge for historians. Yet it is all too tempting to speculate

and re-imagine her life. The life and work of this extraordinarily talented yet self-destructive woman make her one of the most fascinating figures in post-revolutionary Mexican culture—on par with the likes of Frida Kahlo, Tina Modotti, Nahui Olin, Antonieta Rivas Mercado, Nellie Campobello, and the transgendered Amelio Robles. Certainly, an aspect that is highly contentious, and one that is attractive to me is her sexuality, her rumored affairs with both genders. It interests me because it has major implications for the ways one conceives of the links between homosexuality, Mexico’s musical canon, and icons of national identity. However, it seems like a fruitless task to establish the veracity of her bisexuality outside of word of mouth. Yet for me the question “does it matter and does it make a difference if Lucha Reyes was bisexual?”—whether or not her bedding women was a product of her excessive consumption of alcohol, which disabled her inhibitions, or whether her rumored bisexual promiscuity resulted from her low self-esteem and her desire to be loved—are less important.⁴² Yet, I am deeply convinced that the personal is political. What for me is indisputable is that Reyes’s recordings, film appearances, and her interpretive style easily lend themselves to queer appropriation. And ultimately, as Yvonne Yarbrow-Bejarano writes in her femme homage to queer icon Chavela Vargas, this is my fantasy (42).

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⁴²I gained insights into the ways Garcíadiego and Ripstein represent Reyes while working with Ripstein during the spring quarter of 1995 as his teaching assistant for an undergraduate ten-week course titled “Mexico through the Movies: The Films of Arturo Ripstein” at the University of California, Santa Cruz. I asked him about his depiction of Lucha Reyes and her sexual agency and he said his father Alfredo Ripstein would tell him that Reyes “se acostaba con quién se le ponía enfrente/she would sleep with whoever crossed her path.” Garcíadiego notes that, in her research, her subjects would tell her “Luchita era terrible. Cogía con lo que se moviera: hombre, perro, mujer, escocés. Luchita no tenía límites/Luchita was tremendous. She fucked anything that moved. Man, dog, woman, Scottish. Luchita had no boundaries.” Whatever the truth of these recollections, Reyes’s sexual agency was uncommon enough to make an impression on Ripstein senior and o Garcíadiego’s research subjects. See “Paz Alicia Garcíadiego” interview by director Lourdes Portillo in <http://pstlala.oscars.org/interview/paz-alicia-garcíadiego/> in 76:03 “Queen of the Night. Writing the Life of Lucha Reyes.” In this interview, she states that she took complete creative liberty in writing this script and that she had no interest in narratives about the rise and fall of great figures.

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