Title
"Es Siempre Preferible la Carpa a la Pulquería": The Construction of Poverty in the Music of the Carpas Shows in Mexico City, 1890-1930

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6j8589fw

Author
Bieletto-Bueno, M Natalia

Publication Date
2015

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation
“Es Siempre Preferible la Carpa a la Pulquería”: The Construction of Poverty in the Music of the Carpas Shows in Mexico City, 1890-1930

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

by

María Natalia Bieletto Bueno

2015
© Copyright by

María Natalia Bieletto Bueno

2015
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Es Siempre Preferible la Carpa a la Pulquería”: The Construction of Poverty in the Music of the Carpas Shows in Mexico City, 1890-1930

By

María Natalia Bieletto Bueno

Doctor of Philosophy in Musicology

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Elisabeth Covel Le Guin, Chair

Carpas – or canvas tent shows – were variety shows performed in itinerant or improvised theaters. These shows were one of the most popular forms of entertainment during the first half of the twentieth century in Mexico City. According to dominant ideas extant during the late Porfiriato the carpas and their musical repertory compromised the refinement and good taste the elites wanted to project onto the city. Yet, authorization to install the informal theaters not only remained, but even increased at the end of the nineteenth century and during the years prior to the Mexican Revolution. In spite of the aggravations they caused to the city’s image, these musical shows were presumably tolerated by virtue of their beneficial social function among those who legislators referred to as the “lower classes.” As the years passed, the notion of “poorness” mapped onto these shows was adopted by journalists, intellectuals, historians of the carpas and by the carpas community themselves as an essential attribute. As time passed, the poverty supposed to be characteristic of these shows endowed them with a distinctive quality, provided their audiences with an emblem of
identity, and was later utilized by radio, film and television entrepreneurs to advance their nascent industries.

In this work I take a deconstructive approach to the idea of the “poverty” within the carpas. I claim that, rather than being intrinsically poor, these shows were materially and symbolically pauperized, both by local authorities’ regulatory policies for public space, and by the prejudiced discourses of authoritative figures such as government representatives, journalists, city chroniclers, legislators and intellectuals. I analyze the tensions aroused by the carpas shows between two contrasting social sectors in order to unravel the multidimensional mechanisms – material, discursive, performative, symbolic and affective – by which the music present in these shows became misrepresented and gradually associated with notions of “the poor,” “the people” or “the low classes,” and also gradually becoming an emblem of these people’s supposed inferiority. I thus inquire into the function that music making and music listening in the carpas played as a factor in the inter-subjective formation of social class.
The dissertation of María Natalia Bieletto Bueno is approved

Nina Sun Eidsheim

Raymond Knapp

Alejandro Madrid

Elisabeth Covel Le Guin, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015
# Table of Contents

List of Figures vii

Acknowledgments x

Preface xv

Vita xix

Introduction 1

Chapter One 26
   Mexico City at the Turn of the Century and the Culture of the Carpas Shows

Chapter Two 87
   The Space of the Poor and the Geography of Urban Entertainment

Chapter Three 145
   Escándalos and Nightly Shows: the (Failed) Attempt at Sonic Control

Chapter Four 222
   Representation, Performance and the Rise of the Popular in the Carpas Shows

Chapter Five 291
   Sensory Landscapes, Cultural Memories and Narrativity: the Carpas Shows as a Space of the Poor

Appendix 354

Sources 401

Works Cited 403
List of Figures

Tables

Fig. 1.1 Structure of administrative power.
Fig. 1.5 Variation in the prices of carpas between 1910 and 1920.
Fig 1.6 Average retail prices of basic goods in Mexico City between 1910 and 1918
Fig. 1.7 Minimum wage in the central region
Fig. 1.8 Comparison of nominal and real wages in Mexico between 1900-1913 and 1917-1920.
Fig. 2.2 List of established revista theaters and carpas-jacalones authorized in the downtown area in 1921.

Photographs

Fig. 1.2 Request to install a cotton tent, written by Mr. Genaro Roque, AHDF-SDP Vol. 821, (April 19th 1921).
Fig. 1.3 “Salón Variedades en Plaza del Carmen” (1928). (MAF), No. 44668 3-2.
Fig. 2.3 “Carpa Aventino. 7ª Netzahualcoyotl and Av. José Ma. Pino Suárez, 1928”, MAF, No. 44668, 209-2.
Fig 2.4 “Carpa Salón Elena, 4ª Calle de Netzahualcoyotl, 1928”, MAF, No. 44668, 209-3.
Fig. 2.5 “Carpa Amaro.” Fondo Documental de Carpas. (lacks reference number) Centro de Investigación Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (CITRU).
Fig. 2.6 “Carpa Bombay flooded,” Sistema Nacional de Fototecas, (SINAFO) No. 375395 (1952).
Fig. 3.1 “Zócalo ca 1890”
Fig. 3.2 “Crowd in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral” (1925) Archivo Casasola, SINAFO 2373.
Fig. 3.3 “Passersby in front of a carpa, next to the Cathedral” ca 1930, SINAFO 91490.
Fig. 3.4 “La rumba” Cover page of the weekly newspaper supplement Revista de Revistas. (April 3, 1921)
Fig. 3.5 “Jugglers, clowns and Musicians performing in a street” SINAFO 98827
Fig. 3.6. “Man playing a phonograph in the streets of the city” SINAFO, Archivo Casasola, Inv. 127344 (1934).

Fig. 3.7 Advertisement “El fonógrafo Edison.”

Fig. 3.7b “The Phonograph” detail of an ad published in Revista de Revistas, March 27th, 1910.

Fig. 3.8 “Advertisement, Edison Victor and Columbia Phonographs”

Fig 3.9 Advertisement “Todos o cualquiera de estos artístas tocarán o cantarán para usted en el Fonógrafo Edison.”

Fig. 4.1 Tonadillera Consuelo Mayendía, dressed in the iconic Mexican attire of “china poblana.” Published in Revista de Revistas, 1921.

Fig. 4.2 Chucho y Marina, from the Mexican production of the Género chico Zarzuela El país de la Metralla.

Fig. 4.3 “Program for the género chico zarzuela Los Campesinos” Fondo Carpas, CITRU.

Fig. 4.4 “Detail of the frontis of Carpa Variedades.”

Fig. 4.6 “Litograph of Circus Orrín”

Fig. 4.7 “Inside the Circus Orrín, published in El mundo Ilustrado (1903)”

Fig. 4.9 “Picture of two clowns at the frontis of a carpa-jacalón.” SINAFO No. Inv. 276175

Fig. 4.10 Amelia Wilhelmy, published in Revista de Revistas.

Fig. 5.1 “Gritón de Carpas” Cartoon by Miguel Patiño Solórzano

Fig. 5.2 Photograph of a “gritón de carpas”

Fig. 5.3 “Carpa Mariposa”

Fig. 5.5 Cartoon “Moralidad en las carpas de Barrio” by Roberto Cueva del Río.

Fig 5.5a Detail (right side) “Moralidad en las carpas de Barrio”

Fig. 5.5b Detail (left side), “Moralidad en las carpas de Barrio”
Maps

Fig. 1.4 Location of the carpa Salón Variedades.
Fig 2.1 “Directorio Comercial de la Ciudad de México.” (1883) Detail taken from Julio Popper Ferry.
Fig 2.7 Modern day segregation of space for musical and dance entertainment.
Fig 5.4 Corner where a marijuana seller nicknamed “Cara Cortada” was caught.
Fig. 5.6 Location of Plaza Martínez de la Torre.

Musical examples

Fig 3.10 *El Gendarme y el pelado* (1st phrase)
Fig. 3.11 *El Gendarme y el pelado*, (2nd phrase)
Fig 4.5 Excerpt Transcription of the first dance of *Los Campesinos*
Fig. 4.8 Transcription- “Quietecito” from *Un circo de barrio*
Acknowledgments

Many people and institutions have to be credited for the completion of this dissertation. The writing of this document could have not been possible without the financial support of the Grants for Graduate Studies Abroad given by the Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (FONCA), of which I was a beneficiary in the editions of 2011, 2013 and 2014. In 2010, UC Mexus financed a period of five months to complete course work at the Academia Real de San Fernando and at the Biblioteca Nacional de España, in Madrid. It was during these months that I started conceiving this project. I also have to thank the Latin American Institute at UCLA for having financed my first research visit to the archives of Mexico City in the summer of 2010. The students Projects Funds of the Herb Alpert School of Music financed two of my projects allowing me to spend two months in Madrid in 2012, and then presenting earlier versions of my chapters in the City of Havana in 2013.

During the time when I was gathering materials, I had the assistance of many librarians and archivists who were always kind and helpful. This includes in Mexico, the personnel of the Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal, of the Fonoteca Nacional and of the Mapoteca Orozco y Berra. I owe special thanks to Socorro Merlín, at the Centro de Investigación Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (CITRU) in Mexico City for her encouragement in pursuing this project and for her guidance when exploring the Carpas Collection. In Madrid I am grateful for the assistance of María Luz González Peña, Ignacio Jassa Haro and Enrique Mejía García at the Centro de Documentación y Archivo of the Sociedad General de Autores y Escritores (SGAE). They gave me the best course in zarzuela de género chico I could have asked for.

In Chile I was able to discuss my work with colleagues whose intellectual support I deeply cherish: for this I thank Rodrigo Torres, Julio Mendívil, Laura Jordán and to friend and historian Rodrigo Henríquez, all of whom gave me invaluable feedback on early versions of chapters one and two. Samuel Llano read an early version of chapter three and gave me interesting ideas to compare
the cases of Mexico City and Madrid. He also pointed me to important secondary sources. To Ana María Ochoa I thank her kind and attentive words when I talked to her about my research. The technical aspects of this manuscript also required the technical knowledge of Laura Lagos who assisted me in annotating maps, and of Christian Spencer who transcribed and edited the zarzuela example. He also helped me countless times with the edition of this manuscript and patiently taught me the most useful secrets of Word, Endnote and Sibelius all along the process. I certainly could not have done it without his help.

In this journey, I was fortunate to find generous and kindhearted people who gave me their unconditional help: to Irene Donate and her sister, and to Inma Matías Polo, for their hospitality in Madrid while I visited the archives of the SGAE and the Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE). My special and heartfelt gratitude goes to those wonderful people who hosted me in their homes even before having met me: Angel Polo Matías and Ana Crovetto as well as Juano Radic Vega and María José García Castaño in Madrid. In Barcelona, I owe special thanks to Marta Solé. Her kindness and charming company made my time in that city most enjoyable. In Chile I thank Jean-Paul Mengin and his family for having lent us their wonderful beach house where I wrote most of chapter three. I also thank Carmen Souto and María Elena Vinueza for inviting me to share my ideas with wonderfully interesting people at the event Casa Tomada at the Casa de las Américas, and for arranging a most auspicious week in Havana.

When met Elisabeth LeGuin during the early days in the doctoral program, I always knew I wanted her to be involved in this project. What I did not know was the extent to which our relationship, personal and professional, was going to be positively transformed and enriched through the years. The more I know her scholarship, the more it amazes me, and the more I confirm how right it was to have her as my main advisor. Professionally Elisabeth was an attentive reader, a provoking interlocutor and a meticulous editor. Her genuine and unyielding curiosity never ceases to
inspire me both as a scholar and as a person. Personally, she has been a friend, an accomplice, a fandango partner and one of the most restless minds and bodies I know. Someday I hope to learn from her startling acts of escapism as a mechanism to revitalize personal inventiveness, imagination and creativity.

Alejandro Madrid was a careful and critical reader. His attention to the accuracy of the historical facts made me be a better writer. I thank him for his professionalism and for the time and interest he devoted to this dissertation.

I also thank the department of Musicology where I found a niche of intellectual growth. To Ray Knapp for his trust and support from the very start of my days in the program, to Tamara Levitz for her earlier involvement in this project and to Olivia Bloechl and Nina Eidsheim for their always-inspiring seminars. To all my colleagues in UCLA with whom I shared almost seven years of a vibrant and motivating intellectual environment, but especially for their solidarity and support expressed in many ways, their friendship made of this city my home. To Laurel Haran for having taken care of me in times of need. To Alexandra Apolloni and Aaron Bittel for having hosted me in Los Angeles when I was homeless and for baby-sitting my accordion Artemio. To Jennie Gubner for bringing flowers and laughter to our house. To Lindsay Johnson for having delivered care packages during my Masters exams. To people in Dissertation Seminar for their constructive criticism and ideas: Xandra Apollini, Peter Lawson, Lindsay Johnson, Lindsay Strand-Polyak, Zara Ersoff, Mindy O’Brien, Morgan Woolsey, Tiffany Naiman, Andrea Moore, Julius Reder Carlson, Ryan Rowen, Arreanna Rostosky, Mike D’Errico, Marissa Steingold. To Alejandro García for our conversations at lunch and our camaraderie this last year.

Olga González Silén has been along my side from the very start of this craziness that is academic life, even before either of us could understand basic directions in English. From our antagonistic debates in sleepless nights in Singapore, to her bringing me Thai shrimp soup to
comfort me in difficult times in Los Angeles, her friendship has always been reassuring. She has accompanied my intellectual growth and always encouraged me to continue this venture. She indefatigably edited chapter four of this dissertation, but that is only one among the many things I have to thank her for in our life-long story.

I am also most grateful to Barbara Van Nostrand. Her patience in explaining me from how to fill simple forms, to how to navigate the UC system, to how to figure out the American idiosyncrasies was a life-saver during my early years in the program. In later years, I understood that forms will keep changing, that the UC system is simply too complicated to be understood and that the American idiosyncrasy is as unfathomable as any other, but that Barbara would offer to help me anytime I needed it.

Jill Rogers and Hyun Kyong Chang have been two partners in crime during all these years. They have also been unconditional friends and supportive beyond limits. They have been my family in Los Angeles and I could not imagine how this experience would have been without them.

To my family in Mexico, especially to my grandmothers Rebeca and Carmita both of whom put their efforts into shaping me into the woman I became. I thank also my cousinsisters Diana y Rocío Bueno for always being there asking me about my feelings and my progress, for hugging me for no reason and for always keeping in touch.

My parents encouraged and supported this dream of mine from the very start, at times without knowing much about it, but always trusting me. My mother's dedication, rigor and commitment to academic culture were indispensable in my formation. I could have not gotten this far without her splendid example of discipline and sense of responsibility. On the other hand, my father's intrepidness and sense of freedom gave me the courage I needed to explore the world, to be resilient to adversities and stubborn enough to attain my often-whimsical endeavors.
Chris has been along my side even before the idea of this dissertation was conceived. I thank him for loving and supporting me from the day we decided to be together distance notwithstanding and despite both our Ph.Ds. He also made me notice that no one would understand my dream better than him. Our daily conversations, our shared readings, the conferences we attended together, his kind and attentive ears, his patience in my technology-induced tantrums, our sleepless nights and his caring love have their imprint in every word of this dissertation. In the last months of writing he became my life support system and I cannot thank him enough for it. We have been fortunate enough to complete this stage of our lives together and to crown it with our best co-creation.

Thanks to Lautaro for the gift of his smiles and for being in our lives.
Preface

I was twenty years old when, upon my return to Mexico after two years living abroad, I wanted to spend some time with my father. He lived in the city of Saltillo, in the northern State of Coahuila, where he had moved some years before. A former classical cellist and a rock star of moderate fame, my dad became during my childhood an actor in an itinerant troupe which was dedicated mostly to performing children’s plays. As I suppose the little daughter of any actor would do, I spent hours backstage trying on different masks and costumes and seeing my dad and his colleagues – a Brazilian couple I revered – getting dressed and ready for their show. I stared at them as they put on make up with one hand, while skillfully holding tiny squared mirrors on the other. So many times I saw the same play, that I learned all the parts, expecting to play them one day myself. The years went by, and my dad travelled who knows where, spending months away but always sending his timely telegrams for my birthdays. With his loving words, he would tell me about the things and places he had seen, inadvertently igniting my own wanderlust, with which I have had to learn to live.

When I visited him in my twenties, his partners had gone back to Brazil, and he was on his own with his company. He was bound to a summer tour in the northern border cities and needed two more people to perform with, so he asked my brother and me to join him. Finally my time to perform had come. He rented a big van and off we went to those towns in the desert that were hot as the hell itself. My dream come true was far from what I had expected, and way too different from what I had imagined from dad’s brief telegrams. We had to do it all, from carrying stage props, to sewing sacks, to negotiating with the head of a Christian elementary school for having censored our show because, as he thought, “it taught children about the devil through fairy tales, and extra-marital relationships disguised in conviviality between animals of different species.” As we prepared to perform in public squares and plazas, I saw my father holding the same tiny mirror that was now chipped in the corners. The same old costumes had lost their shine, and the clown white in his face
now revealed his wrinkles. I felt bad for my “old man” because, as I saw it, he had to still wear those shiny leggings and wear make-up like a clown to entertain the children of the lost lands of nobody. I also felt sorry for what I then read as the deterioration of my dad’s dream, and how it had led him into poverty and destitution. I thought he had to find something “better.” But even then, I still understood the gratification he felt after each performance, when the kids hugged us and their parents thanked us for telling such beautiful stories.

It is been more than ten years now since my dad returned to Mexico City and began performing at the Hidalgo garden in Coyoacán, a heritage neighborhood distinguished for its traditional bohemian style. Revamped as an “urban ministrel,” my father now plays his guitar and sings the songs and stories of old times to children, their families and the motley crowds that visit the famous square.

Because I had been trained as a classical flute player and indoctrinated by the values of conservatory culture, it was only through the scholarly viewpoint I acquired while completing my Master’s degree in musicology that I began to observe my own father. I began noticing my own condescending misconceptions about his profession, as well as my classist preconceptions about “art-making.” If, after all, I was the highly educated daughter of a street performer, something must have been wrong about my past understanding of my dad’s choice of profession. Only then did I begin to fully appreciate how he would sneak his political views by “innocently” commenting on well-known children’s songs he had carefully selected as part of his repertory. I scrutinized the voices he chose for the effects he wanted, and began to hear all his nuanced references to the public figures about which he read in the recent news. I too, noticed how elder people would cry or hug him thankfully whenever they felt touched by a song he had performed. I noticed the time and commitment he took to hear the people who approached him asking him to tell this or that story. By seeing him perform under this light, I began admiring my father again.
These were the late 2000s and, just like a century ago, the approaching celebration of the bicentennial of the Mexican independence caused numerous transformations to the city. As is habitual in Mexican politics, the leaders of different parties contended for the political approval of foreign eyes and international investors. And as in the past, their desires left their traces in public policies for the use of public spaces. In 2008, the right-wing local government of Coyoacán decreed that the Jardín Hidalgo and the contiguous plaza Centenario, where my father performed, had to be refurbished and that street sellers and performers had to be banished. As official discourses had it, “these vagrants had to find something better to do than living off the pockets of well-intentioned tourists.” These were also the years when, in this craze for beautification, the chief representative of the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI) stated that indigenous children who sold products or solicited alms in the recently renewed touristic plaza in the port of Ensenada “were a plague” and that something had to be done to protect these tourist sites (Octavo día, July 12, 2013).

In Coyoacán my dad joined the association of “open-air artists” (artistas a cielo abierto) funded by the many street performers and artists who resisted the local government’s initiative. As they argued, their performances were part of Coyoacán’s cultural identity, and they were committed to preserving its traditions. Alluding to the guerrilla imaginary, they organized the EPLN (Ejército Payasista de Liberación Neuronal), and called the people to defend the working spaces of “popular artists.” Troubled and fascinated at the same time by the entanglements of matters of cultural persistence/resistance, conflicts of political interest, rampant classism and even racism, I decided to trace back the history of street performances in Mexico City, an interest that led me to the carpas shows of the early twentieth century. Just as I once questioned my own imaginary about my dad’s destitution, I questioned historical narratives of the carpas shows and their supposedly poor people.
This dissertation is inspired by my dad, for what he has taught me about the value of performing in the streets. It is a humble way to honor him and performers like him for their invaluable role in preserving and passing on the cultural heritage of their art.
Vita

2005  B.M., Flute Performance,
      National School of Music, Mexico City
      B.A.
      National Autonomous University of Mexico,

to Olivier Messiaen’s Le merle noir”
      Advisor: Gonzalo Camacho Díaz.

2007  Academic Exchange program,
      Musicology and Ethnomusicology Departments
      University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

2007  Master’s Thesis Writing Fellowship,
      “Programa de Apoyo para la Investigación y la Tecnología,”
      Regional Center for Multidisciplinary Research,
      National Autonomous University of Mexico,

2008  M.F.A. in Musicology,
      National School of Music
      National Autonomous University of Mexico,

2008  Honors Master’s Thesis: “Globalization and Mexican National Identity in
      Avant-garde Mexican Composers.”
      Advisor: Gonzalo Camacho Díaz.

2008  Mellon Foundation Fellowship,
      University of California Los Angeles,

2010  Cátedra Robert Stevenson
      “Course of Musicology for the Preservation of Hispanic and Latin American
      Musical Heritage”,
      Carolina Foundation and the Royal Fine Arts Academy of San Fernando,
      Madrid, Spain,

2011  International postgraduate summer school, “Methods of Popular Music
      Analysis”, Organized by The ASPM (Arbeitskreis Studium Populaerer Musik)
      University of Osnabrueck. Osnabrueck, Germany,

2012  International postgraduate summer school, “Decolonizing Knowledge and
      Power: Postcolonial Studies, Decolonial Horizons”
      Global Dialogue at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona,

2011, 2013, 2014  Fellowship for Graduate Studies Abroad,
      National Endowment for the Arts in Mexico (Becas para Estudios en el
      Extranjero, Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes)
2009-2011  Teaching Assistant,
          Department of Musicology
          University of California Los Angeles,

2001-2014  Teaching Associate
          Department of Musicology
          University of California, Los Angeles.

2012      Visiting Lecturer
          Department of Musicology,
          Universidad de Chile.
Introduction

Carpas – or canvas tent shows – were theater and musical variety shows performed in itinerant or improvised theaters. These theaters settled temporarily in public plazas and in different corners and streets of what is now known as Mexico City’s historical downtown, but which at the end of the nineteenth century was simply called Mexico City. Itinerant or improvised theaters, also called *jacalones*, used canvas tents for roofs, hence the name with which these variety spectacles were known.

The Dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language, the most authoritative association for the regulation of the Spanish language, simply describes a carpa as a “big tent that covers a circus or any other ample venue.” For what it concerns the word “jacal,” this same source indicates that it comes from the Nahuatl word “xacalli,” and it refers to a *choza*, or small hut. By contrast, the Dictionary of Mexicanisms, published in 1983, characterized the entry “carpas” as following: “From the quichua *carppa*, tent. Tent or circus roof in which *legua* comedians of modest condition and scarce resources act.” This same dictionary, describes a “jacalón” as “1. a hut, shed roof, and “2. By analogy, this is said of any shabby building, of a flophouse theater, etc.” Clearly, both entries associate these words with two ideas: first, with a number of performing traditions that happened in small portable theaters and two, with notions of poverty and scarcity.

How then did it happen that in Mexican culture, most specifically among the people of Mexico City, these architectural structures became associated with ideas of theater and poverty? What is the role that music played in encouraging such associations? To what extent can the
Mexican State be accountable for these associations? This dissertation is devoted to analyzing these questions.

The development of the carpas shows in Mexico City is coeval to three different moments in the project of Mexico’s nation formation: the years of Porfirio Díaz’ presidency (1874-1911) – especially in its latest period – the Revolution war, (1910-1920); and the post-revolutionary governments (1920-1950). Because each of these moments responded to different political agendas, official policies around the control of public spaces, of people and of entertainment activities were different in each case. Such measures also differently affected the way in which the carpas theaters were administered by their managers and controlled by authorities. Likewise, the political and administrative changes impacted how the musical repertory in these shows was decided by the managers and companies, regulated or censored by authorities, and in some cases, defended by their audiences.

Life in Mexico during the nineteenth century was characterized by decades of political unrest and economic distress following the declaration of independence in 1821. After numerous internal and external conflicts, it was only towards the end of the century that a sense of territorial, economic and political stability was achieved. During his first term, Porfirio Díaz’ priority was to reorganize and pacify the country by creating various defense institutions against foreign interventions. During

---

2 Turbulent military events as well as the territorial struggle to delimit both the physical boundaries and the political alignments of the new independent country were distinctive events during most of the century. Towards the mid-century, the interventionist politics of the United States, combined with López de Santa Anna’s role in the Mexican Cession in 1848, led to the loss of half of Mexico’s Northern territory. Internally, too, the Mexican State had to restructure its relationship with the Church through a civil war known as the Reformation, advanced by Benito Juárez between 1857-1861. Years later, (1863-1867) the nation had to face the last of European occupations advanced by Maximilian of Habsburg who, with the backing of Napoleon III and other local supporters, sought to revive monarchism in Mexico. This period, known as the Second Empire, came to an end as the Mexican liberals, led by constitutional president Benito Juárez and General Porfirio Díaz, defeated the Mexican conservatives and the Austro-Hungarian troops in 1867. And, while the assassination of Maximilian sent a clear political message about the legitimacy and the capacity for self-defense of the Mexican Republic, the so-called Restored Republic (1867-1877) brought with it a severe economic deficit that became one of the most pressing concerns of the Mexican liberals. Finally, the annexation of Chiapas in 1895, which had formerly belonged to the Confederation of Centro American States, was the event that set the permanent borderlines of the nation.

2
these early years (1874-1900), industrialization of the country and transition to a liberal economic system based on capitalism were of prime concern for the Mexican governing classes. By contrast, during the later period of the Porfiriato (1890-1910), Díaz and his governing team were concerned with showcasing the country’s economic success and gain the political recognition of northern powers. In this context, the capital city served as the emblem of the progress and modernity that the Porfirian officers endorsed. Therefore the local government devoted considerable efforts to modernizing the city and beautifying it.

The existence of itinerant variety shows precedes the government of Díaz. Around the decade of the 1860s, these forms of entertainment started to proliferate in some Mexican cities because travelling companies stayed for longer periods of time in urban centers. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, these shows were no longer brought by travelling companies, but consisted basically of a medley of pastime activities put together by a local amateur entrepreneur who had the adequate space and enough talent at promotion to present them. Oftentimes, these entrepreneurs were simply resourceful neighbors. Settling seasonally in public squares for celebrations such as Patron Saint festivities, All Saints Day, and Christmas, these shows were performed in small jacalones covered with canvas tents.

According to dominant ideas extant during the late Porfiriato these improvised theaters and their musical repertory compromised the refinement and good taste the elites so eagerly wanted to project onto the city. Yet, authorization to install the informal theaters not only remained, but even increased at the end of the nineteenth century and during the years prior to the Mexican Revolution. In spite of the aggravations they caused to the city’s image, these musical shows were presumably tolerated by virtue of their beneficial social function among those who legislators referred to as the “lower classes.” As the years passed, the notion of “poorness” mapped onto these shows was adopted by journalists, intellectuals, historians of the carpas and by the carpas community.
themselves as an essential attribute. As time passed, the poverty supposed to be characteristic of these shows endowed them with a distinctive quality, provided their audiences with an emblem of identity, and was later utilized by radio, film and television entrepreneurs to advance their nascent industries.

In this work I take a deconstructive approach to the idea of the “poverty” within the carpas and contest naturalized views that these venues of entertainment were essentially for the dispossessed sectors of the population. I claim that, rather than being intrinsically poor, these shows were materially and symbolically pauperized, both by local authorities’ regulatory policies for public space, and by the prejudiced discourses of authoritative figures such as government representatives, journalists, city chroniclers, legislators and intellectuals. I analyze the tensions aroused by the carpas shows between two contrasting social sectors in order to unravel the multidimensional mechanisms – material, discursive, performative, symbolic and affective – by which the music present in these shows became misrepresented and gradually associated with notions of “the poor”, “the people” or “the low classes,” and also gradually becoming an emblem of these people’s supposed inferiority. I also sustain that the Euro-centric subjectivities of these figures worked in tandem with the project of urban modernization to marginalize these shows, but most importantly to differentially categorize people who attended them as part of the “lower sectors of society.”

Within the context of the city’s modernizing project, I propose that the extant antagonism between “rural” and “urban” helped to outline the borderline between progress and primitiveness. In the context of the urban environment, the “popular” then was understood as the residual side of modernization and perceived as something to be overcome if aspirations to the “civilized” or “progressive” were to ever be attained. Deriving from this, a line was also established between what was “modern” and what was “traditional,” according to musical and auditory practices inside the carpas. It is precisely the problem of consolidation of urban attitudes that I believe situates the issue
of social class at the core of the symbolic struggle. For inspectors, legislators, and the elite – namely, press editors and reporters, music critics, writers – to successfully adopt an “urban attitude” may have meant to discipline the body through adjusting to norms of hygiene, manners, public display and musical taste. For the carpas’ actors, singers and audiences, adaptation to the urban environment may have simply meant physical and cultural survival, requiring them to be resourceful and creative under the new conditions as well as developing the affective mechanisms to cope with such changes. The historiographical problem, I sustain, resides in the subjective reactions of those who inscribed the carpas’ records, and which has since counted as historical evidence. My attempt to read such evidence against the grain is therefore an attempt to re-narrate the history of these shows and their people.

Music is a cultural manifestation prone to being used to construct cultural differences, and local authorities and elites used it in exactly this way at the carpas. I thus inquire into the function that music making and music listening in the carpas played as a factor in the inter-subjective formation of social class. To this end, I complicate the question of who attended the carpas and interrogate the meaning of “the poor” in the city. I contrast the evidence of the social standing of the people who attended the carpas and those who wrote about them in belittling terms.

The carpas shows were nourished by a wide array of performing traditions. Some of them are the many European circus companies that arrived in Mexico in the nineteenth century; the numerous Spanish zarzuela companies that arrived in Mexico around the same time; American vaudeville shows whose troupes crossed the northern border with ease; as well as the Caribbean companies that, with the spectacles called Bufos Cubanos, offered a great array of Afro-Caribbean musical genres. The convergence of these disparate music styles sparked heated debate among Mexican critics about their artistic worth. It also laid the ground for the construction of a peculiarly Mexican divide between “popular” and “artistic” expressions.
The dichotomy between what is popular and what it is not seems to have arisen in Mexico in the context of nationalist official culture. During the heyday of the carpas shows in the 1930s and 1940s, the Mexican post-revolutionary government propounded an idea of a homogenous, mestizo nation that ended up typifying social collectives and assigning them roles of action in the new modern Mexico. It was at this time that the carpas shows, once marginalized forms of entertainment, became the “birth place of true Mexican artists.” For this reason, I propose the distinction of two conspicuously different periods in the development of the carpas shows.

Florence Gutiérrez has explained that the “jacalones de variedades” were the direct predecessors of the carpas shows in the city: “during the period 1870-1890, historic sources only refer to the installation of jacalones, but in no case they are referred as carpas.” Requests for permits, written by company managers to the city’s authorities during the second half of the nineteenth century, reveal that juggling, zarzuela, puppet shows, boxing, lottery, acrobatic acts, trained animals, magic acts, and film screening were initially the preferred activities offered at these informal venues of urban entertainment. It was only from the 1890s to the 1920s that both terms, “jacalones” and “carpas,” are found in civil registers. There they refer to the provisional theaters as well as to the varieties shows performed in them.

---


5 One of the earliest requests I have been able to find dates from 1893, and is that presented by Sra. María Villaseñor de Urueña, who wanted to settle a “provisional theater in the Southern end of the Alameda Central, for the season of All Saints (November).” Since her request did not receive any response from the Ayuntamiento office, she repeated the attempt the year after with approval from said office AHDF-SPD Vol. 4016, file 103 (1894).

6 Throughout this work I will use the terms “jacalones,” “carpas” or “carpas-jacalones” to refer to the provisional structures as well as to the shows. I will use the term “carpa” whenever I refer to a specific one, and “carpas”, the plural form, to talk about them generically. I use the term “carpero” to talk about a person who worked in the carpas companies.
The first stage, I claim, extended from approximately the 1890s to the early 1930s. These included the late Porfirian years and the period of the Revolution during both its armed and non-armed phases. The second period extends from the 1930s to the 1950s, a period that many authors consider the heyday of the carpas. This temporal division can be justified by the different repertoires offered, the different social functions assigned to these shows by their protagonists (which includes performers, audiences and government officers) as well as by their different operating mechanisms, and their contrasting relationships with the Mexican State.

In their earliest days, these shows were one of the many entertainment activities that occurred outdoors in a city with a distinctive social life. Nothing that I have found in the archives indicates that these shows were linked to the poor of the city during the years between 1860 and the 1890s. As far as repertory, it was during the 1890s that music theater displaced other forms of non-musical entertainment in these venues. As a result, boxing demonstrations, acrobatic acts or animal shows disappeared from the carpas-jacalones and developed their own paths. Likewise, the growing popularity of the moving pictures at the turn to the twentieth century caused a demand for the creation of a circuit of “cinematógrafos” or film houses in jacalones that eventually separated from the music variety theaters. If puppetry and magic shows had been important in the early jacalones of the 1860-1880s, towards the end of the century, they remained only as supplementary acts that accompanied the main musical attractions. Comedy acts, however, remained as important, coming between the musical acts. Musical numbers such as string quartets, popular songs and other local adaptations of chamber music were also part of the musical acts at the early jacalones shows.

7 In fact, many owners of jacalones officially requested permission to change the focus of their entertainment centers and opted to convert them into film houses. AHDF, SDP Vol. 805, File 995 (1899); Vol. 805, Files 922 and 923 (1899). These files also contain cases of requests for authorization to transform “salones de diversiones” or “cinematógrafos,” into “salones de variedades.” For a historical account of the separation of jacalones that performed music varieties and those that offered films, see Juan Felipe Leal, Eduardo Barraza and Carlos Flores, Anales del cine en México 1895-1911. Vol. 5. 1899 ¡A los barrios y a la Provincia! (México, D.F. : Ediciones y Gráficos Eón : Voyeur, 2003).
The growing demand for musical theater in the capital city had a direct impact in the carpas repertory. During the 1890s, one-act zarzuelas – also known as género chico – enjoyed great public acclaim among Capitalino audiences in formal theaters. To satisfy the growing demand for these shows, carpa managers increasingly included them as part of the varieties until they became the main attraction. The theaters began to be known as “jacalones de zarzuela.”

As social discontent and political angst swelled towards the first decade of the twentieth century, the Mexican Belle Époque also came to an end. The characteristic naiveté of the early Porfirian years dwindled as the social injustices committed for the sake of the national development project became more apparent. The schism was reflected in the realm of entertainment. The cuplés psicalípiticos, brief theatrical songs with erotic undertones, targeted to male audiences, caused a great commotion and attracted the attention of authorities. To circumvent the censorship and regulation usually applied in formal theaters, many female singers – then called tiples – migrated to perform these controversial songs in the carpas, where managers warmly welcomed them, and where authorities were more lenient. It was during these years that the carpas-jacalones became real competitors to the formal theaters, but it was also the period when authorities found an excuse to segregate them from the central area of the city.

During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the carpas shows were gradually turned into a marginal manifestation of dispossessed social groups. In the last decade of the Porfiriato (1900-1910) authorities thought the carpas offered people in their audiences an acceptable form of entertainment, and that they were an alternative to vagrancy or pulque drinking, both of which were considered to compromise the status quo of a capital city in the process of modernization. During these ten years, officers from the Ayuntamiento – the City Council – tolerated
the carpas because they saw them as an alternative way to “contain the poor.”8 With the exception of few exceptional cases the associations of these shows with “the poor” during the 1900s were gratuitous. However, during the decade comprised between 1910 and 1920 references to the “poverty” within these shows was justified. The economic crisis brought about by the Revolution of 1910 forced many people in the city to find alternative sources of income. Therefore, according to records that have survived from the 1910s to the 1920s, the carpas shows primarily provided jobs for people who would otherwise have been unemployed. Official tolerance on the grounds of social class also determined the musical repertory offered in the small portable theaters. If the cuplés psicalípticos had already found a refuge in the carpas, the politically charged revista musical – a satirical musical show alluding to ongoing events and widely performed in formal theaters – was also soon exported to the smaller theatres where legal and political persecution was rare. Likewise, comedy sketches inspired by shifting social hierarchies delighted visitors to the carpas. During the 1920s therefore, the carpas shows did not serve the ideological agendas of the state; rather they contributed to channeling political discontent, to mediating between opposing political views, as well as to making sense of the changing social dynamics and contrasting official narratives that followed the Revolution.

The start of the second period of development of the carpas is marked by the definite establishment of the recording industry in Mexico and by the first broadcasting of the XEW radio station in 1930. Owned by Emilio Azcárraga Vidaurreta – the eventual magnate of the Televisa consortium – the XEW can be credited for the cooptation of the carpas in the interest of the development of the industries of film and television. In contrast with the early period, during the

---

8 Efforts to control the visibility of the poor in the city were not new, but can be traced to the nineteenth century. By using a system of classifying paupers “according to their worthiness,” officials relocated vagrants, beggars, mendicants, and other unemployed people by putting them to work at the private sector, by sentencing them to military work, or by confining them to asylums and poor houses. For a detailed study of these policies see Silvia Marina Arrom, *Containing the Poor: Mexico City Poor Houses, 1774-1871* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).
second one the carpas gained fame and renown. The subversive potential of the shows was undermined too, as they became integrated into official popular culture. Most existing literature on the carpas, considers this period the heydays of these shows. Radical changes in the social dynamics of the carpas led to their transformation and eventual disappearance after the decade of the 1950s.

My focus on the period of transformation between the 1890s and the 1930s responds to changing perceptions of the carpas, from being a neutral form of public entertainment to being an expression “typical of the poor.” The carpas’ close interconnection with the development of the modern Mexican State was my original fascination with this topic. I claim that the carpas movement – particularly in an earlier stage – complicated the notion of a modernizing nation, as well as interdependent ideas of popular and national cultures. Furthermore, I question the reasons for and ways by which members of the carpas audiences ended up identifying with the “poor” and thus internalizing an inferior social position. During this agitated period of Mexico’s political history, the social order was deeply altered and official discourses of a supposed “true Mexican race” provoked shifting perceptions of the social hierarchies. If the carpas represented a challenge first to Porfirian ideals of modernization and progress, and later on to post-revolutionary government’s discourses of the new modern Mexico it was because the carpas shows made use of a variety of characters, plays, songs and performance practices to contest the official narratives of the modern nation through parody, comedy and derision.

Extant Literature On The Carpas

Existing literature on the carpas comprises a variety of disciplines and topics of scholarly interest. From as early as the 1910s, the carpas shows caught the attention of journalists and theater critics. In the 1930s, intellectuals and theater scholars began to publish analytical studies of the carpas shows. The opinions of these figures of authority cannot be dissociated from the politics in
which the Mexican State was invested, first the liberal government of Porfirio Díaz, and then populist administrations by post-revolutionary leaders. Therefore, I use their writings as primary sources to debate the historiographical narratives of these shows.

In more recent years, the carpas shows have called the attention of historians interested in the interactions between these shows and the Mexican State. Romina Martínez explained how the content of the carpas shows conflicted with dominant moral values in a conservative society in Guadalajara, the capital city of the State of Jalisco. By distinguishing the particularities of Mexico City’s and Guadalajara’s shows, Martínez problematizes the ways in which the carpas may have contravened the ideological campaigns of different post-revolutionary governments. I am deeply indebted to her work, which has been invaluable in conceptualizing my own. Martínez however, did not offer an interpretation of how the relationship between space and legal policies impacted the urban experiences of Guadalajara’s inhabitants. In this dissertation I undertake such an analysis and apply it to the people of Mexico City.

Ageeth Sluis makes an argument for the role of theatrical spectacles in the creation of public space in Mexico City, as well as in the transformation of gender roles in Capitalino society. In her doctoral dissertation, she devotes a small section to the carpas shows and the appreciation they merited among some inspectors of the Office of Public Entertainment. Likewise, in a study of the intersections between labor activities and political power in Mexico City at the end of the nineteenth century, Florencia Gutiérrez discusses the cross-roads between the larger problem of regulation of urban space and political control. She argues for the distinction between two different repertories in the jácalones: those targeted to male audiences, and thus of more salacious content, and those

---


addressed to families and abiding by the extant norms of morality. She however, does not pursue what this important observation meant in terms of the location of the theaters. Without developing the topic in detail, Gutiérrez also documents urban workers’ defense made of these shows against the attacks by local authorities.

The importance of comedy in the carpas shows has also inspired studies by historians of Mexican theater and performance practice. Roberto López Marure’s senior thesis “The Evolution of Mexican Comic Film through the Performance of Carpa’s Artists” addresses how the performance practice of carpa actors contributed to the fixation of the technical aspects of comedy.\(^{11}\) He discusses the theatrical elements associated with the birth of a national identity in theater, and debates carpas’ actors’ role the advance of the early movie industry.

A growing body of scholarly literature has been concerned with the carpas shows that were performed in the Southern United States. Tomás Frausto-Ybarra and Yolanda Broyles-González have devoted attention to explaining how these shows informed the tradition of the Teatro Campesino that was so important for the Chicano movement of the 1960s. Likewise, Peter Claire-Haney’s doctoral dissertation describes the expansion of the carpas shows among the Mexican American colony of San Antonio, Texas, during the first half of the twentieth century.\(^{12}\) Exploring the theatrical elements of certain stock characters, Claire-Haney confirms the symbolic importance of these shows for community building and cultural resistance against the dominant Anglo culture.

\(^{11}\) Roberto, López Marure. “La evolución del cine cómico mexicano a través de la actuación de artistas del teatro de carpa,” (Tesis Licenciatura, Licenciado en Literatura Dramática y Teatro, UNAM, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, 1997).

Socorro Merlín’s book *Vida y milagros de las carpas* (The Life and Miracle of the Carpas) is perhaps the most authoritative monograph on the carpas shows of Mexico City written to date.13 Published in 1991, her work is a mandatory reference for anyone interested in the history of these shows. One of Merlín’s most important contributions was the creation of the *Fondo Documental de Carpas (Carpas Documentary Collection)*, which includes, programs, photographs, tapes and transcripts of the interviews Merlin conducted during the late 1980s with carpa actors and singers, many of whom died shortly after.14 The second part of Merlín’s book is a collection of these testimonies. These interviews provide important information on how carpas community members appraised their own artistic activity, how they conceived of their social position and class allegiances, as well as accounts in which they assigned a particular social function to the carpas as “theater for the people” (*teatro para el pueblo*).

Although all these works acknowledge the crucial role that music played in these shows, they treat it as ancillary to their subject matter. Most importantly, they all reproduce the idea that the music played at these itinerant theaters catered to the tastes of “popular classes.” The writings of Carlos Monsiváís were pioneering in highlighting the importance of the carpas shows in the development of Mexican popular music, and hence of popular sensibility.15 His work has been crucial for my own inquiry into the carpas shows and their relationship to hegemonic musical cultures and to the State. The scarce, if not inexistent, attention that Mexican musicologists have

---


14 Copies of documents on the carpas culture, the originals of which are scattered in different archives, have now been gathered together in photocopies and are kept at the Centro de Investigación Teatral Rodolfo Usigli (CITRU) of the Centro Nacional de las Artes in Mexico City. The catalogue of this collection was published as a CD-ROM. I am deeply grateful to Professor Merlín for having made this material available to me during the earlier phase of my research, before it was officially published.

paid to the carpas shows is striking. My dissertation seeks to remedy this, and to open new paths of inquiry.

Besides scholarly studies, testimonial literature offers important information on the carpas. Pedro Granados’s *Carpas of Mexico: Legends, Anecdotes and History of the Popular Theater*, published in 1984, is a retrospective account narrated in first person by a former member of the carpas audiences. Written in the form of personal impressions and memories, Granados’ anecdotes allow the reader to connect the socio-political context of the early twentieth century with the carpas scene. Plentiful details and affective references in Granados’s narrative provide important data on the location of the theaters he used to frequent, while also giving clues about the forms of sociability and the musical practices inside and around the carpas shows. I use Granados’ book, one of the most detailed testimonies of these shows, to immerse myself and my readers in the sensory and emotional landscape at the carpas shows. I consider his testimony as key to analyzing processes of internalization of the social stigma of poverty, the subject matter of chapter five.

**Methodology**

Expressed in political terms, the concern of this dissertation is to explore the problem of agency and affectivity within the carpas community, *vis-à-vis* de power of the State. In other words: how and why people who frequented or participated in the carpas were turned into “the poor,” and why they accepted such a denomination. This problem called for the design of an eclectic methodology in which various fields of inquiry coalesce.

Revealing the colonial, racial and class grounds that determined the creation of written registers of the carpas shows and their music is a goal common to all five chapters. This line of
inquiry has greatly benefited from the fields of postcolonial critique and subaltern studies. Following historiographies that question the notion of historical evidence, I analyze and discuss the records of the carpas shows and the problem of the production of historical archives of musical entertainment. Since associations between the carpas scene and notions of marginalized groups are ubiquitous in both archival records and retrospective literature on the carpas, I intend to investigate the material factors that determined the segregation of given social groups and their leisure activities, as well as the symbolic mechanisms that assisted in the elaboration of ideas concerning the “the poor people” as referred by authorities and members of the carpas community. These symbolic operations, I claim, served the elite in consolidating an image of themselves in times when profound social changes challenged their social positions.

In her exposition of deconstructive historiographies, Spivak proposed that there is an inherent “cognitive failure” in hegemonic discourses arising from fact that the power of the elites is greater than that of the subaltern, causing an ineluctable silencing of the subaltern experience. She asserts that the power of the ruling classes conditions the production of historical evidence, so that only traces of marginality are accessible from the perspective of the elites. Since the hegemonic discourse lacks its subaltern counterpart, the “cognitive failure” becomes irreducible. Spivak finds

---

16 By a subalternist approach I am mainly referring to the work started by the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group. This project was later followed by the Latin American Group of Subaltern Studies Group, originating an academic dialogue between Latin Americanist scholars based on the US and the Subaltern Studies collective originating in India and England. I conceive of as “subaltern studies” within the framework of the dialogue between these groups.


19 This would account for one of the principal differences between historiographies concerned with writing 'histories-from-below” and those that resort to a subaltern perspective based on deconstruction: while the former departs from available evidence concerning marginal sectors taking these documents as facts, the latter would question the very nature
in deconstruction an alternative way to prevent the historian from falling into the immobilizing acceptance of this failure. The interesting maneuver, she says, is “to examine the production of ‘evidence,’ the cornerstone of the edifice of historical truth, and to anatomize the mechanics of the construction of the self-consolidating Other.” Registers of the carpas shows reveal that indeed the only way we historians can access information about their musical practices is through the prejudiced gaze of censorship inspectors. It is the subjective component of their conditioned aurality and their accounts of musical performances that I deconstruct in this work.

Subalternist scholarship has also paid special attention to the relationship between the State’s law making and official conduct and the problem of collective representation, both as “speaking for” and as a “portraying.” Spivak proposed the use of the terms Vertretung [to stand in for] and Darstellung [to represent], customarily used in German idealist philosophy, to distinguish between the two meanings. In chapter four, I adopt this distinction and analyze the question of whether the carpas community had any agency to self-represent politically, and/or to elaborate self-crafted symbolic representations of marginality at these shows. Most specifically, I utilize Bishnupriya Ghosh’s concept of the popular icon, to analyze representations of the marginal subject at the carpas shows.

The topic of race, racialized musics and ethnic discrimination in the conformation of social class underlies most topics in this dissertation. To a great extent, the intense miscegenation of the evidence; nevertheless, instead of being inclined to immobility when facing such fragmented and biased records the researcher is expected to take active part, embracing their voids and interpreting them. Gayatri Spivak has discussed this in a variety of works: see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); __.”Can the Subaltern Speak?” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg's eds. Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, (Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1988); __.“Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular,” Postcolonial Studies, Vol. 8, no. 4, (2005): 475-486.


characteristic of Latin American history accounts for why the problem of class and ethnic discrimination is much more complex than the mere adjudication of social position based on the visible traits of identity. Rather, ethnic discrimination resulted from people’s capability for cultural assimilation into the dominant (Eurocentric) culture. This makes it harder to disentangle the reasons for the unjust treatment and material dispossession that Indian people and peasants, for example, received during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Mexico. I incorporate critical scholarship produced by Hispanic and Latin American thinkers, believing that their critiques of coloniality are well suited to explain how the remnants of the castas system have affected more recent forms of social structuring. Some of these authors are Angel Rama, Carlos Jáuregui, Enrique Dussel, Aníbal Quijano and Roger Bartra. Affiliated with these authors and more specifically concerned with the problem of sound and listening, the work of Ana María Ochoa has modeled my reasoning at several points in my dissertation. I adopt her conception of the aural as a central aspect in the production of ideas concerning language, voice, sound and music that determine the politics of life.²³

To interpret the processes of social disenfranchisement that took place through the musical and cultural practices around the carpas, I use Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano’s notion of the “coloniality of power,” which accounts for the profound transformations occurring in all realms of existence with the colonial occupation of the Américas, and which remained subsequently to it. As Quijano argues, since the early colonization of the American continent a “racial matrix” – a global hegemonic model of power – was put into play. This matrix has articulated race and labor, space and peoples, according to the needs of capital and in the benefit of white Europeans. Because this matrix has naturalized the superiority of European culture, it has also justified the classification of people into inferior and superior, irrational and rational, primitive and civilized, traditional and modern. All

of these categories have responded not so much to phenotypic features as to the cultures with which they are associated.\textsuperscript{24} As a result, symbolic processes of inferiorization and social segregation on the grounds of the intersections of race, ethnicity and cultural practices have been equally, if not more determinant, for class construction than economic ones. Discrimination as a result of these intersecting traits of identity has impacted both the objective and the subjective realms since the early colonial occupation.\textsuperscript{25}

Quijano’s demand is to seriously consider the processes by which Indians and African slaves, for example, along with their cultures, were deemed naturally inferior, and thus denied the right to own property and accumulate capital. He implores us to consider the mechanisms by which their cultural practices (including music) were derogatorily apprised as ‘savage’, ‘uncivilized’, ‘traditional’, ‘immoral’ or simply ‘disgusting’, ‘tasteless’ or ‘lacking in artistic value,’ depending on the driving ideologies of the time. In this sense, Quijano argues that what is required is not only to study the historical events setting the material conditions that determined social class or dispossession, but also to make a history of social classification. Therefore, in addition to paying attention to traditional elements for class analysis (income, education level, occupation, etc.), I incorporate Quijano’s consideration of the wound that has been continuously and systematically inflicted on certain cultural practices, by which their practitioners have become “the lower class.” The political and


\textsuperscript{25} Over the past ten years, theories of intersectionality have analyzed how the interlocking aspects of identity (race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and social class) are interconnected and how oppressive institutions have used them to discriminate against. While initially black feminists led scholarly writings on intersectionality, the approach was later adopted by scholars interested in forms of discrimination other than sexism and racism.
epistemological implications of such move are to acknowledge that the bases of class-assignment and marginalization) are not uniquely, not always and not fundamentally economic.\(^{26}\)

After the Mexican Revolution, a new social order acknowledged the cultures of and granted civil rights to Indians and peasants, albeit nominally. This induced a generalized socio-symbolic crisis, for while it negated the legality of the *castas* system, in actuality it perpetuated its workings. The *castas* system now operated in a deceptive way, its racist tenets not as self-evident as in colonial times.\(^{27}\) The concept of “colonized subjectivities” underlies my analysis of the discourses that authorities and elites inscribed about the music of the *carpas*.\(^{28}\) I use this concept in chapters one and two to explain the internalized racism and Eurocentrism that determined the writing of the *carpas’* civil registers. Similarly, Angel Rama’s conceptualization of the “lettered city,” and Ana María Ochoa Gautier’s notion of “the aural public sphere,” assist my understanding of the symbolic space constructed by the elites for preservation of their social status, as well as of the accountability of these social circles in the development of segregationist urban policies. In chapter two I frame the

\(^{26}\) The interpretive framework proposed in this dissertation thus clearly aligns with decolonial historiographies that, while sharing Marxism’s political purpose to disentangle class and power differentials, are also critical to the Eurocentrism of its categories for social analysis.

\(^{27}\) Despite the changes in the legal frame, the de facto social status of Indians after the Revolution did not change much. Even if placed in the center stage, the indigenous groups that inspired the post-Revolutionary Indigenist artistic current were mainly pre-hispanic. This use of indigenous culture was just as it had been during the Porfirian years. Catherine Héau Lambert has argued that during the Porfiriato, Indians and other popular classes adopted the denomination “race,” in a context that was most disadvantageous, which forced them to reverse its negative connotations. Common people, claims Héau Lambert, “had to rely upon a reinterpretation of the dominant ideology [to articulate] their dialogue/resistance with the national State in order to place their views and make them selves heard.” [Translation is mine]. Catherine Héau Lambert. “La reapropiación ideológica de la idea de raza entre los campesinos morelenses a fines del siglo XIX y durante el Porfiriato” in *Identidades Populares e Ideología* Año 3, no. 6 (2009): 145-62.

struggle for urban space for music making as intrinsically entangled with the symbolic struggle for social status.

My analysis of intersubjective constructions of social class considers two denominations, the *pelado* and the *lépero*, used since the late nineteenth century by the Mexican elites to deprecate people who, in their view, lacked the refinement, culture and distinction that they believed themselves to have.\(^29\) While these two figures are commonly found in historical registers and sources about the carpas, it was the pelado that became a stock character ubiquitous in carpas comic sketches. In chapters four and five I analyze the symbolic workings of this character. My treatment of this instantiation of the pelado as an urban marginal is assisted by Roger Bartra’s analysis of the “savage”, and by Carlos Jáuregui’s critical view of both the “savage” and the “cannibal” as cultural tropes.\(^30\) In these interpretations, these two tropes served the European colonial sensibility as instruments for self-definition. As Bartra argued, when understood as a cultural trope, and not as an incarnated entity, the “savage” served the European mythology in crafting an inferior otherness through which the symbolic frames of civility could be drawn, within which they could fit themselves. When transcultured to colonial lands, the attributes of the “savage” were transposed to the imaginary figure of the “cannibal,” which embodied all the fears and anxieties of the colonizers. Comparing the savage with the cannibal in the context of Latin American nationalisms, Jáuregui explains: “For the nationalism at expansion, the

\(^{29}\) Other terms of common use during this period to collectively categorize the less privileged strata of society in nineteenth-century Mexico included: *zaragatos, plebe, zaramillo, chusma, peladaje, zaramullos, guachinango*, all of them used by the educated society to create a social archetype by which they could reaffirm their superior social position. Ana María Prieto has provided a thorough study on the use of these terms and on how they were elaborated in the discourse of the educated elites, observable in the accounts of foreign travelers, educated criollos and mestizo. In her book she also discussed the racial implications of such denominations. She has also contextualized the distinction between the terms “lépero” and “pelado,” stating that the former was applied to those who were materially dispossessed, while the latter referred to impoverished individuals who were perceived to deserve marginalization due to their bad moral character. Nonetheless, she sustains, by the early 20th century both terms were used indiscriminately by the elites. Ana María Prieto Hernández, *Acerca de la pendenciera e indisciplinada vida de los léperos capitalinos*. México, D.F.: CONACULTA, 2001), 265.

savage, [cannibal] is an abject body that refuses to disappear pacifically.”\textsuperscript{31} The parallelism is clear: if during the sixteenth century the imaginary “cannibal” served to justify the colonial project, in the early twentieth century the imaginary pelado - as an uncivilized, rebellious and abject Indian who had migrated to the city - justified the modernizing agenda of Mexican nationalism. At the same time, it contributed to perpetuating the marginalization of unsubmissive Indians or any other person who resisted cultural assimilation. And just as the cultural tropes of the “savage” and the “cannibal” encountered numerous instantiations in literature, painting or sculpture, so too did the pelado in theater comedy.\textsuperscript{32}

The first chapter of this dissertation is instrumental. It provides important information about the political, ideological and socio-economic context of Mexico City during the years under study, as well as an account of the intersections between the operational system of the carpas shows and the official mechanisms for regulating public space and entertainment in the City. The period comprised between 1890 and 1930 represents a moment of rapid socio-political change in the country at large, but most visibly in Mexico City. To assist understanding of what these changes entailed, I provide an interpretation of Mexico’s postcolonial position \textit{vis-à-vis} the world’s politics, and present an overview of the political agenda of the late Porfirian regime. I describe the organization of the Ayuntamiento office and its division of Public Entertainment, the governing apparatus in charge of controlling the carpas shows and other similar spectacles. I illustrate how the chaos brought about by the Revolution disrupted the preexisting social order. This affected the administrative order, and with it, the historical registers of the carpas and their musical repertory. Along the lines of historical materialism, in the second half of this chapter I address the material culture of the carpas shows.

\textsuperscript{31} Jáuregui, \textit{Canibalía}, 256.

\textsuperscript{32} Elsewhere I have elaborated on the figure of the pelado as an Indian who migrates to the capital city and finds himself discriminated against due to his cultural habits, as well as on how this figure was used in theater. See Natalia Bieletto-Bueno, “peladito” (pelado) in María Herrera-Sobek, ed. \textit{Celebrating Latino Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Cultural Traditions} (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 895-896.
The goal is to assist understanding of how the modes of production and the economic structure of the carpas community may have conditioned the establishment of certain social relationships and forms of collective consciousness.

The carpas theaters, initially located in the main central plazas of Mexico City, were gradually segregated to peripheral or marginal neighborhoods of the city (barrios). Description of this process is the topic of the second chapter. I show that the policies for urban planning were determined by Eurocentric and historicist ideas of progress and civilization. As the country’s bastion of such progress, the capital city of Mexico had to resemble the big metropolises of Europe and North America both visually and culturally. I explore the symbolic mechanisms that the local authorities used to introduce a change of attitude among the general population, so that common people would embrace an “urbanized behavior.” This would in turn facilitate acceptance of the physical and socio-demographic changes taking place in the City. I inquire into how the precarious appearance of the carpas compromised the image that governors and the elites desired for Mexico. I also explain how the cultivation and preservation in the carpas of some musical practices that the authorities associated to marginalized cultures – such as traditional Mexican sones, musics of black heritage, and erotic cuplés – gave authorities the perfect justification to banish these itinerant theaters to neighborhoods that had less urban infrastructure. The presence of these musics and the acclaim with which audiences favored them, also gave authorities and journalists the elements for symbolically classifying the people that frequented the carpas as humans unable to participate in the narratives of civilization – or as Ramón Grosfoguel has put it, as people “below the lines of civilization.”

The sonic conformation of Mexico City and its connection with the musical cultures of the carpas is the topic of chapter three. To start my narrative, I describe the profound impact of the intense architectural and technological changes of the end of the nineteenth century on the way the

33 Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies…”
Capitalino population perceived sounds. I show that the authorities’ perception of “noise” was by no means dissociated from the socio-demographic changes taking place in the City. In this chapter, I take as a premise that the classification of noise is not an acoustic problem, but a phenomenological and a socio-cultural one, through which cultural otherness is defined. Noise is therefore presented as an instrument for classifying people. Using my own perceptual position, I connect with my experience of listening the sounds of the city in the early twentieth-first century and expose the many socially bound and subjective mechanisms put at play in the process of aurality and in the categorization of noise. Following Ana María Ochoa’s notion of the “sonic public sphere” as a space of social struggle, I “listen” to the historical idea of escándalo as a case of noise, and explore the social discomfort that certain musical practices and sonic reactions on the part of the audience at the carpas caused among authorities. I maintain that two divergent models of aurality, one represented by the hearing cultures at the carpas, and the other one idealized by authorities, coexisted in conflict. This, I claim, reveals the pressures, fears and anxieties that the carpas community exerted on the elites and the authorities, disclosing the project of modernity as a fallacy of early twentieth century Mexican politics.

In chapter four I use Spivak’s Darstellen and Vertretung to complicate representation as a theatrical enactment and as a problem of political stance. To pose the problem, I revisit historiographic accounts of the “popular” in music, and more specifically of the “popular” in the carpas, as characterized by the writings of Carlos Monsiváis. I question what musical practices in the carpas shows – and what behavioral practices among the carpas audiences – may have prompted inspectors, music critics, intellectuals and journalists to dismiss the music in these shows as “vulgar,” “frivolous,” “unimportant” or, in their own words, “popular,” and therefore as manifestations of the “poor classes.”
Assisted by postcolonial approaches to the topic of performance, I contrast such dominant characterizations of “the popular” with the political agency that actors and musicians at the carpas may have had. I do this by discussing the music and acting in the numbers they performed. I historicize the theatrical elaboration of archetypes of popular subjects, and claim that stock characters such as the peasant and the pelado – used in in the revista musical shows, and hence in the early stage of the carpas – were prone to be interpreted as destabilizing the status quo, and thus retaliating to the oppressive hegemonic system. Informed by the field of performance studies, I distinguish between those musical actions or gestures that were theatrical enactments, from those that were political actions. I am interested in the possibility that contemptuous gestures were a part of early carpas performance, giving the shows a retaliatory character. By analyzing a brief selection of musical works, I speculate on those instances that may have given the carpas community some political agency, as well as on those that, in contrast, assisted pernicious forms of social classification. The latter possibility would have increased particularly as the carpas shows were coopted by the local industry of entertainment.

The fifth and last chapter addresses the forms of narrativity and memorialization that may have contributed to create subjective identifications with the “poor” and el pueblo among members of the carpa community. Early interpretive articles on the carpas date from the 1930s to the 1970s, when intellectuals involved in the area of theater and art criticism such as Miguel Covarrubias, Salvador Novo, Jose Clemente Orozco, Julio Bracho and Manuel Gutiérrez Nájera wrote about their impressions of these shows and connected them to the ongoing nationalistic project. Likewise, some foreign visitors saw in these shows a sort of picturesque manifestation of the urban popular classes that gave Mexican drama a distinct identity. Their views have served me in complicating the issue of historical narratives and historiography of the carpas, and in interrogating the discursive elaboration of the popular urban subject. These authors share views of the carpas shows as spectacles targeted
to the poor people of the city, and while their assumptions are partially understandable due to the precariousness and provisional nature of the structures of the theaters, there was a conflation between the general appearance of these venues with the social standing and taste of the audiences that visited them. Their writings have led to the unquestioning assumption that the audiences that attended these provisional theaters were indeed made up of people in the most disadvantageous material conditions, and thus that the shows catered to a “popular taste.” As a result the problem of what such an alleged “popular taste” meant, and for whom, has not yet merited scholarly debate.

Understanding this as a problem of perception, I adopt a phenomenological stance and explore how cultural memories of the carpas were the result of emplaced experiences shaped by the surrounding material environment. To this end, I connect the argument developed in chapter two concerning the geographic segregation of the carpas, with the idea that inhabiting destitute urban spaces (barrios) incited the development of particular embodied forms of cultural memories. Following Nadia Serematakis’ notion of “sensory landscapes,” I explore how the materiality of the barrio, naturalized as the niche of the carpas, provided multi-sensory experiences that were deeply valued by those partaking of the carpas culture. These incarnated experiences, many of which were incited by specific musical practices, engendered affectual responses that have shaped many narratives about the carpas. These affectual responses started the process of historical inscription of these shows by their participants.

Within this process, forgetting and concealment of the formerly socially varied composition of the carpas audiences also began. Because rapid urban changes and the entrenchment of the local industry of entertainment happened around the same years, the transformation of the carpas was abrupt. The carpas community sensed how the urban changes compromised the shows, while also noticing their imminent transformation into affluent centers of entertainment. Feelings of nostalgia among the carpas community for the portable theaters’ old days accompanied this transmutation
and ignited a need to identify them with poverty and destitution as marks of their authenticity. With this association, the social stigma of poverty became an emblem of cultural identity irrevocably connected to the carpas.
Chapter One

Mexico City at the Turn of the Century and the Culture of the Carpas Shows

In the summer of 1899 the journal *El Cómico*, in México City, published a note listing the formal theaters that, located in the center of the Capital city, were destined for the performance of Spanish zarzuela and its shorter version, the género chico.

The Teatro Ópera, the Principal, the Arbeu, the Hidalgo, the Nacional (...) Who can talk about anything else? We are in the theater fever, despite the coming inauguration of the new drainage system. Mexican zarzuela, Spanish zarzuela, Italian zarzuela, translated French [zarzuela], big genre, small genre, masculine genre, feminine genre, (...) nobody dines at home any more because they all go to the tandas. Restaurants multiply and Mexico begins to live at night.

In his brief account, the reporter also mentions the growing popularity of the “tandas,” a modality of selling musical-theater by the hour and which dominated the theater scene in Mexico City from the 1890s to the 1920s. The tandas originated in Madrid when the zarzuela de género grande was reduced from three to one act, so that a show would last one hour at the most. This practice was imported to Mexico City and other Latin American countries with outstanding results. The commercial success of the tandas popularized this repertory among the Mexican audiences, thus boosting the revenues for theater entrepreneurs, especially at formal venues. Most revealingly, this

---

34 The use of the term “French zarzuela” in this quote probably refers to French operettas whose librettos had been adapted by Spanish zarzuela composers. Many of these French comedies are referred in local press accounts. A vast and meticulous account of the musical repertory played in each theater is available in a print compilation of press reviews published in four volumes under the title *El Teatro en México durante el Porfismo*. These primary sources include reviews originally published by leading newspapers and weekly journals such as *El diario del Hogar*, *El Cómico*, *El Mundo Ilustrado*, *El Universal*, *El País* and *El Mundo*, to mention only a few. See Luis Reyes de la Maza, *El teatro en México durante el Porfismo*. (México D.F.: UNAM / Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1965).

35 “El Teatro Ópera, el Principal, el Arbeu, el Hidalgo, el Nacional. Quién va a hablar de otra cosa? Estamos en plena fiebre teatral a pesar del drenaje y del desagüe que va a inaugurarse. Zarzuela Mexicana, zarzuela española, zarzuela italiana, francesa traducida, género grande, género chico, género masculino, género femenino (...) ya nadie cena en su casa por ir a la tanda. Los restaurantes se multiplican y México comienza a vivir de noche.” *El Cómico*, 20 de Agosto 1899, in Reyes de la Maza, 385.

note also illustrates perceptions that, despite the many efforts of the local government to urbanize the City, common people were more concerned with spectacles than with the ongoing modernization process. The playful mention that this genre modified night-time sociability in the city is significant for its recognition of perceived social changes in the late Porfirian years.

Indeed, during the last decade of the nineteenth century, urban changes in Mexico City were ubiquitous. The railway system had expanded throughout the country, making transportation easier. This allowed itinerant theater companies to travel easily between the different towns and cities of Mexico. Similarly, as the year 1900 approached, the capital city was being profusely transformed. Although the author of this note suggests that the Capitalino people did not care much for the urban changes, the truth is that the official obsession to “modernize” the country affected all aspects of urban life.

The end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries in Mexico was a time marked by the idea of modernity. While the term “modernity” as a historical category has been applied recurrently to explain processes of social change observable since the early colonial period, the idea of “becoming modern” acquired new and particular meanings in Mexico during these years. Porfirian ideas of what it meant to “transition to modernity” were conditioned by the historicist model of progress and the pressure of the North Atlantic capitalist system. As an aspirational force, Mexican governing classes equated modernity with movement towards capitalism and a market economy, industrialization, urbanization and secularization. Therefore, Mexican ideologues and policy makers endorsed all public measures undertaken to favor of these goals.

In this chapter I explain the historic, political and ideological context in which Mexico, as a country, was embedded at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, by approaching modernity as a “structure of feeling,” in the sense given by Raymond Williams, as well
as its effects on the development of the carpas shows. This ideological and affective environment preconditioned the carpas shows and it shaped public life around them. At the same time, the very existence of the carpas shows compromised the idea that Porfian authorities had of modernity.

Insofar as the most insidious effects of the modernizing process on the lives of the vast majorities became more evident, a larger social movement among the Mexican population emerged which led to the war of Revolution. After the revolt, unsurprisingly, the preexisting notions of what it meant to be modern were also deeply transformed among the Mexican society. These changing ideas were expressed through different cultural manifestations including the performing arts and entertainment activities. The carpas scene intertwined with the changing political environment. My objective is to outline how ideological, socio-political and economic contexts in the years between 1890 and 1930 determined the social interactions inside the carpas culture in ways that may have represented a contestation to the official project, and then subsequently, how this cultural environment conditioned the elaboration of notions and lived experiences of social class. I address how the music performed in these shows was transformed as result, thus also modifying the affective experiences of those who frequented the carpas shows.

In the first part of this chapter, I summarize the most relevant factors (historic, ideological, financial and political) that determined the official policies for controlling urban space for entertainment in the streets of Mexico City. Dominant ideas of “art” strongly conditioned the views that the authorities and the elites had of the music at the carpas and, derivatively, of the people who frequented them. I refer to the measures undertaken by authorities to control and regulate these

---

37 Raymond Williams characterized the “structure of feeling” as the subjective perception of the quality of life in a given time period. This lived experience suggests commonalities among members of the same generation and it is most clearly articulated through cultural products and artistic creations. I am here considering the carpas shows as a manifestation of this structure of feeling. See Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature. (Oxford [England]: Oxford University Press, 1977).
musical shows, and explain the institutional order that enabled the administration of power in the city and, most specifically, around the carpa theaters.

The stigma of poverty created around the carpas can be credited to local authorities, journalists and city chroniclers, whose writings characterized the modest infrastructure of theaters as well as the (supposedly) dispossessed condition of their audiences. I maintain that the problem was not so much one of material dispossession as it was of social classification. I outline the ideological and political factors that conditioned the “colonized subjectivities” of these writers and illustrate the ways in which they were invested in a process of classifying people socially according to their choice of entertainment activities and preference for musical practices.

The marginalization and/or impoverishment of the carpas and their people was not only symbolic but also physical and material. Therefore, in the second part of this chapter I document, to the extent allowed by primary sources, the material culture of these musical shows and their practitioners. Along the lines of historic materialism, the goal of this section is to assist understanding of how the modes of production and the economic structure of the carpas community may have conditioned certain forms of collective consciousness. In this section I examine the carpas as an economic activity. I observe factors such as the organization of labor, the distribution of profits, and the inner organization of companies to conjecture how the working conditions of the carpas may have fostered social relationships that caused carpas workers to identify as members of the same community; a community that eventually came to understand itself in terms of “social class.”

**Part I: Mexico at the Turn of the Century**

One of the most important challenges that Porfirio Díaz faced when he first became Mexico’s president in 1874 was to unite the formerly fragmented cultural regions of the country into
a cohesive entity, able to stand and to be internationally recognized as the Mexican nation. To build this “imagined community,” a new system of organization that worked in all the political, economic and ideological realms was needed. Furthermore, the country’s post-colonial condition tacitly dictated that its entrance into modernity would be determined by the government’s capacity to make the nation comply with the ideals of economic liberalism, and with the universalizing model of capitalistic progress imported from central Europe. With the motto “order and progress,” Díaz and his governing team encouraged internal production and favored foreign investment, seeking to attain the support of international powers. Local industry flourished at an unprecedented rate, while indices of general prosperity, as measured through Mexico’s international commerce, skyrocketed.

Such political measures were aimed to simultaneously exploit the Nation’s natural resources at the expense of the local labor force and to reduce cultural variety into an easily discernible unit, a process also identified as “internal colonialism.” This may partially account for why Díaz stayed in

---

38 For an interpretation of the term “imagined communities” as a factor in the process of Nation formation see Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991). For a historical overview of the project of nation construction in Mexico see Fredrick C. Turner, *The Dynamic of Mexican Nationalism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968). My understanding of the dynamics by which the modern Mexican state has exploited its natural resources and its labor force, and subsequently managed (or not) the ensuing reactions by those affected by the State's internal domination has been significantly shaped by the works of left-wing scholars such as James C. Scott, *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed.* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); Viviane Brachet de Márquez, *The dynamics of domination: state, class, and social reform in Mexico, 1910–1990* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1994).

39 More specifically, this meant to conform to principles originating in the American and French Revolutions, which, by replacing monarchies with Nation States, claimed to protect the rights of individuals and of private property. This not only changed the internal organization of the countries involved, but also the ways in which Nations related to other Nations; this in turn had massive effects on the distribution of routes and modalities of trade, setting up the emergence of new economic powers, and placing Spain and its ex-colonies as Europe’s “periphery.” Rationalism and secularism took precedence over religiosity. Since then and along with other economic, social and ideological changes, these principles have served traditional historiographies to demarcate the beginning of “the modern age.” While the validity of this periodization is debatable, the scope of its political and historiographic influence is undeniable.

40 As a system of political organization, the modern Nation State of the twentieth century established a set of rights and obligations for every person allegedly with no consideration of their ethnic origin, linguistic background, religious beliefs or race. Because as an abstract entelechy the state can only operate through institutions that, for reasons of governability, apprehend people only as collective bodies, state institutions promote cultural and linguistic homogeneity by a way to reduce cultural variability into simplified cultural stereotypes. As a matter of course, the various elements of these stereotypes coexist in constant conflict resisting any stable fixation. In many ways, this conflict inexorably causes a struggle between ethnic regionalism and cosmopolitanism. But, as a political principle, the ideal attainment of a synthesis.
power for twenty-three years. However, Mexico’s symbolic entrance into the ranks of “mature” countries compromised the lives and cultures of the ethnic minorities as well as of the majorities that conformed the work-force. Dissatisfied with conditions of exploitation that verged on slavery, these majorities led the war of Revolution that finally put an end to Díaz’ régime.⁴¹

The Eurocentric civilizing ideals from the years Mexico was a colony of Spain were lingered in the nineteenth century and were used by policy makers of the Porfiriato to dichotomize people arbitrarily as “superior” and “inferior” beings.⁴² Díaz and the men of his governing circles, known as Los Científicos, were social Darwinists; the effect of this system of thought upon social policy during the Porfiriato was of course particularly adverse for Mexican Indians, peasants, and poor people. Within this postcolonial context, Mexican authorities and the elites feared their country would be deemed “uncivilized,” “backward” or simply “traditional” in foreign (read: European and North American) eyes, and so they promoted campaigns to advance new habits of hygiene, order, discipline and even appearance among the city-dwellers.⁴³

Ongoing ideas of urbanism also affected notions of shame, the body and the self. As the elites and authorities saw it, integration into urban life was an imperative condition for attaining the so-desired modernity. Therefore, encouraging particular modes of social interaction among the inhabitants of an urban space became a major concern on the part of the dominant sectors. As Norbert Elias explained in The Civilizing Process (1939), changing conceptions of shame and

⁴¹A concise thesis of the socio-economic factors that conditioned the Mexican Revolution can be found in Friedrich Katz, De Díaz a Madero. (México, D.F.: Ediciones Era, 2004).


⁴³During the nineteenth century measures like the so called “campaña de pantalonización” (“trouser’s-wearing campaign”) were undertaken by President Díaz in order to “improve the image of the city.” This campaign consisted on replacing the loose white cotton pants or ‘calzón de manta’ worn by Mexican Indians for ‘proper’ trousers. See Verónica Zárate Toscano, “Los pobres en el Centenario.” in Proceso Bi-Centenario 6 (September 2009): 4-19.
embarrassment that entailed the body, public conduct and manners were used in Westernized societies as indicators of the “degree of civilization.” Similarly, the Mexican ruling classes were majorly concerned about controlling the public conception of the “morally correct,” as this notion would determine the international perception of Mexico and of ‘the Mexican’ as, respectively, a civilized country and a civilized person who would in turn stand for the entire population.  

People’s behavior had to be concordant with these civilizing principles. As a result, the spheres of public and social life were increasingly regulated to different degrees through laws, regulations, codes, manuals, sanctions and punishments. Most conspicuously during the late years of the Porfiriato, Díaz and his governing team turned Mexico into a sort of theater, performing itself for Europe and the United States, on a transnational stage, with an involuntary cast of millions. Mexican citizens, the involuntary actors, however, needed to be modeled, in minds and bodies, to properly suit the representation and gain the coveted applause from their powerful audience.

**The Problem of Race in Nineteenth Century Mexico**

The fact that in the nineteenth century people like Benito Juárez or Porfirio Díaz, both of whom identified as indigenous, could become influential politicians, even reaching the presidential seat, made it clear that recognition and social mobility would come as a result of integration to the Western model of education and culture, and not from one’s perceived ethnicity. In other words,

44 A presentation of the conflicting relation between the authorities/elite’s concerns for morality, and the position of the ‘common people’ can be found in Lillian Briseño Senosiain, “La moral en acción: teoría y práctica durante el Porfiriato.” in Historia Mexicana, 55: 2 (Oct-Dec, 2005): 419-60. In her study the author also explains the relevance of notions of morality for constructions of the “new Mexican.”

45 For examples of the control of public behavior during this time, see Valentina Torres Septién, “Manuales de conducta, urbanidad y buenos modales durante el porfiriato: Notas sobre el comportamiento femenino” in Claudia Agostini and Elisa Speckman Guerra eds. Modernidad, tradición y alteridad: la ciudad de México en el cambio de siglo XIX-XX, (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 2001), 271-289; and Elisa Speckman, “Las tablas de la ley en la era de la modernidad: Normas y valores en la legislación Porfiriana,” in Ibid., 241-270.
discourses of culture in Mexico made people believe that the adoption of Western cultural habits was equivalent to become “civilized,” a *sine qua non* condition for modern times.46 Both categories – civilization and modernity – had been used since colonial times by European conquerors to self-describe their culture, thus establishing the frames by which colonial social life had been structured.

Belief in the cultural superiority of the European culture came as a result of the colonial project, but did not end with it. In fact, Aníbal Quijano argues that “coloniality/modernity” is a dual concept whose parts are inextricably linked. As he defines it, coloniality entails the two axes of power that, in actual operation, defined the spatio-temporal matrix called America, and by which both Americans and European conquerors came to conceive of themselves. In Quijano’s view, coloniality is:

> The codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of ‘race,’ a supposedly different biological structure that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others. The conquistadors assumed this idea as the constitutive, founding element of the relations of domination that the conquest imposed […] The other process was the constitution of a new structure of control of labor and its resources and slavery, serfdom, small independent commodity production and reciprocity, together, around and upon the basis of capital and the world market.47

This intersubjective condition in turn produced a long-standing cognitive perspective, by no means exclusive to colonizers or to Europeans, but rather adopted by all those educated under its hegemony. This perspective entails, in this case, a clear Euro-centric component; it naturalizes the experience of people affected by such patterns of power distribution, making it seem unquestionable for those on both sides of the divide.48 Quijano also explained that the effects of coloniality are far

---

46 Both Benito Juárez and Porfirio Díaz self-identified as Zapotec indians, while Victoriano Huerta, president from 1914-1916, had Huichol parents and personally ascribed to this ethnic group. Since Juárez believed that more generals of indigenous origin were needed in the federal arm of the state, he favored both Díaz’ and Huerta’s military careers. Díaz and Juárez shared similar political and economic views. While both were Zapotec Indians, they were also nineteenth century indigenists, in the sense that they both believed that Indians had to be “modernized” and “integrated” to the greater Mexican society, without necessarily attending to their social causes or rights. For a historical narrative on Juárez’ and Díaz’ ethnic allegiances and their nexus with the Zapotec people of Ixtlán, see Patrick J. McNamara, *Sons of the Sierra: Juárez, Díaz, and the People of Ixtlán, Oaxaca, 1855-1920*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).


48 Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder,” 94.
more enduring than colonial occupation itself. Lending a close ear allows noticing that during the
nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the effects of such colonized subjectivities persisted in ways
that affected all social realms of Mexican life, including not only music making but listening practices
at large.

During the Porfiriato, native cultures were indeed valued, but only as archaic relics that,
while glorious in the past, were perceived to be in decadence in contemporary times. Since a living
indigenous heritage was seen as a hindrance to development, the glory of Indian cultures was
construed as historical and long gone. The Indigenismo of Porfirian years, as a political policy and as a
current of thought, consisted in the invention of a national past that was grounded on archeological
studies and historiographic representations that depicted pre-Columbian cultures as romantic
projections of classic, supposedly universal Western cultural values. Accordingly, numerous cultural
events and artifacts such as international exhibitions, operas or paintings were created by arbitrarily
selecting the most grandiose elements of native cultures and presenting them as analogues to the
classic Western cultures of the Greeks and the Romans. This is exemplified by Alfredo Chavero’s
creation of the prehispanic past in the first volume of Mexico a través de los siglos (1889) or by the
narrative of “indigenous peoples” in the National Museum of Anthropology. This trend is also
illustrated by the Mexican romantic composer’s syncretic use of indigenous sonecitos de la tierra, as
I explained before.

49 See for example the speech offered by Puebla’s governor Antonio García Cubas, Discurso acerca de la decadencia de la raza
indígena (México: Tipografía literaria de F. Mata, 1880).

50 For an explanation of Indigenismo as a recurring current of thought that guided public policies see Leif Korsbaek and
Miguel Ángel Sámano Rentería, “El indigenismo en México: antecedentes y actualidad” in Ra Ximai vol. 3. No. 1 (enero
Abril 2007) 195-224. For the ideological uses of indigenismo in nineteenth century see Terry Rugeley and Michelle M.
Stephens, “Indigenismo in General and the Maya in Particular in the Nineteenth Century”, in A Companion to Mexican

51 Mauricio Tenorio-Trillo, Mexico at the World’s Fairs: Crafting a Modern Nation (Berkeley: University of California Press,
1996).
The wave of migration to urban centers at the turn to the twentieth century confronted the realms of the rural and the urban, causing considerable anxieties to the representatives of the Porfirian government. Statistics show that in the census of 1910, the population that, within the Distrito Federal, was considered “urban” (locales with more than 4000 inhabitants) was 617,000, while the population considered “rural” amounted to 102,853 individuals. The census of 1921 reported that nearly 18% of the population in the Federal District was made up of “purely” indigenous people, 54% by mestizos (“indigenous mixed with whites”), and 22% were “whites,” which means that the ratio of indigenous people to whites was nearly 1:1.52

The visibility of Indians in the capital city thus served to reinforce a stereotype of the Indian peasant. Both the colonial and the Porfirian orders structured society, labor, space—basically any aspect of life—on a naturalized racial hierarchy. And because the colonial division of labor had confined Mexican Indians to agricultural activities, the notions of the Indian and the peasant were gradually conflated, becoming almost undistinguishable in common discourse.53 Therefore, Indians who had moved from the country-side to the capital city faced a classist and racist society that ostracized them and forced them to occupy a fixed and subordinate social position. In this context the Mexican pelado configured the symbolic conformation of the Europeanized subjectivity in the face of a perplexing otherness that was discordant within the historicist model of urban progress.54

To those in power, Rationalism was the only form of knowledge acceptable. Heralded as an emblem of modernity, this model tacitly and condescendingly demanded that Indians or mestizo

---


53 A theoretical study of the conceptual homologation of ethnicity and class in the figure of Indians see Luis Villoro, Los grandes momentos del Indigenismo en México (México: El Colegio de México, 1950).

54 For analytical perspectives on the symbolic workings of the “pelado” in discourses of the Mexican intellectuality see Roger Bartra, La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano. (México: Grijalbo, 1987) and Jeffrey M. Pilcher, Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2001).
peasants neglect their cultural habits insofar as such habits were conditioned by hegemonic understandings of the “backward” and “uncivilized.” Therefore, discrimination against these marginalized groups was above all discrimination against the persistence and visibility of their traditions and distinctive cultural practices. The pelado was thus crafted as the epitome of the immigrant Indian who either by simple cultural persistence, or by open resistance, did not abide by the European civilizing model. Displaced from his birthplace and forced to acquire the habits of the urbanized people, this incomer had to make his way through in a society that segregated him by using his resourcefulness and wit to overcome the stigma that burdened him since colonial times. These people were thus treated as the worst examples of “incivility” and “lack of culture.”

The Changing Social Order in the Revolution

One of the most important social consequences of the Mexican Revolution is that it disclosed that behind the official façade of economic success and cultural and technological accomplishments, lay a system of human exploitation and social injustice. To a great extent, Mexican policy makers had tacitly accepted the existence of such inequities because they enabled continuities with the colonial scheme. But the armed struggle and its subsequent institutional phase, led by the Indian peasants and urban worker majorities, turned the Porfrian social order upside down.

The fact that those at the bottom of the hierarchy had led the armed struggle and succeeded in denouncing and defeating the oppressive system, presented general society with a profound identity crisis. Furthermore, the numerous political assassinations, and the frank chaos of legislative and administrative organisms immediately following the Revolution, put the country into a severe crisis of authority. It is therefore hard to talk about the existence of a Mexican government, particularly from the period between the fall of Huerta in 1914, to the final entrance of the Constitutionalists to the capital city in 1915. And while these events lent special urgency to
repressive measures on the part of those who purported to be the new political leaders, their policies did not succeed in controlling the common habits of the general population.

In this phase of generalized anomie, nobody was exactly certain of the social position that their ethnic origins had once granted them. If during a great part of the colonial period one’s social position could be more or less inferred from racial labels such as indigenous, criollo or Peninsular, in the nineteenth century, this was no longer the case. Instead it was people’s behavior and cultural practices that worked as indicators of their social stand. Perhaps more than ever before, Mexican people started to self-consciously reframe their position in society by observing one another’s skin color, ethnic background, language and accents, educational level, and political inclinations. Since musical practices were still used as indicators of a supposed degree of “culture,” they too entered into this economy of social markers, and this in turn directly affected the social function and perception of the carpas shows.

The Musical Repertory at the Carpas Shows

The music and variety numbers performed at the carpas were as much shaped by the social organization as by the tumultuous financial and political context of the early twentieth century. The economic stability achieved under Porfirio Díaz’ government attracted numerous entrepreneurs, mainly from the United States, England, France and Germany, who wanted to invest in Mexico. Since the country was internationally perceived to be in a moment of prosperity, the second half of the nineteenth century was a moment of intense international migration to Mexico City. These too were the years in which many artistic companies arrived in Mexican cities: circus companies from Eastern Europe, Italian opera companies, and Spanish Zarzuela ensembles all disembarked in the Mexican ports with the intention of promoting their repertories in Mexico and in the rest of the American continent.
As the note published in El Cómico noticed, the predilection, and hence the demand, for the zarzuelas de género chico increased among the population of the city, which needed more theaters to accommodate its growing audiences. Since not everyone could pay to attend the theaters, cheaper alternatives emerged to satisfy the demand for musical entertainment. As theater historian Reyes de la Maza explained,

The zarzuela was the music genre that attracted people from all social classes, yet not everyone could afford the pleasure of going to the Principal theatre, not even to the gallery section. Therefore the teatros-jacalones, which would later become the carpas, emerged in every neighborhood [barrio] in downtown, with singers who were dreadful but who knew how to entertain the people that had paid twenty cents for each tanda.55

Besides musical theater, the tandas also counted on other forms of entertainment. The historian Maya Ramos Smith explained that each tanda included “a one-act zarzuela, or excerpts from longer zarzuelas, operettas, and even ‘zarzuelized operas’ followed by ‘numbers’ or ‘attractions’ which could be jugglers, singers, magicians or dancers of diverse genres.”56

Trained in different performing traditions, it was not a surprise that the performers of traveling companies could enrich the theaters tandas modality with their acts to complement the género chico. This initiated a circuit of exchange between formal theaters and the carpa-jacalones that settled in the streets of the city.

A typical afternoon at a carpa during the period between 1890 and 1930 would start by attracting neighbors and passersby inside the theaters. To this end, a few members of the company,

---

55 “la zarzuela era el género que atraía a los capitalinos de todas las clases sociales, pero no todos podían darse el gusto de acudir al teatro principal, ni siquiera a la galería, de manera que los teatros-jacalones, como se les llamaba a lo que después serían las carpas, surgían por todos los barrios de México con cantantes de ínfima categoría, pero que sabían divertir al público que pagaba veinte centavos por tanda.” Reyes de la Maza, Historia del teatro en México durante el Porfirismo, Vol. III, (México D.F.: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1968), 14.

most likely the musicians, performed brief acts in the streets, trying to gather people around. As they sang or recited, they gave a preview of what anyone paying ten to fifteen cents could enjoy: traditional sones (dance-songs), a comedic sainete (a satiric skit, sometimes with music), or even famous arias from Italian operas. These short numbers performed in the street were popular resources to entice people in. When the starting time approached and actors were getting ready backstage, a man at the front door of the carpa announced the main actors or singers and explained the gimmick: “This and the next tanda for a single ticket!” Each show, or tanda, was made up of a set of musical numbers, comedy acts, magic tricks or puppetry. Occasionally, moving pictures were also shown in the jacalones; but due to their increasing popularity, presenters of films started a circuit of their own and the two forms of entertainment separated.

In the carpa, the main attraction, the género chico piece, was the most salient feature of the tanda; and because many audience members stayed around for more than one tanda, each company’s repertory consisted of up to three different género chico pieces every night. Similarly, the cuplé, a popular risqué Spanish theatre song performed by solo females, or tiples, became one of the

---

57 Many arias from operas and other musical numbers from what is nowadays considered the Western canon eventually became “famous” by the end of the nineteenth century not only among Mexican people but also throughout the Latin American continent. This can be credited to factors such as their wide distribution in print editions for piano arrangements targeted to the elites to be played as música de salón at their tertulias [private parties]. In the first decades of the twentieth century, these piano arrangements were published in newspapers supplements, such as the Revista de Revistas, which made them suitable to be performed in portable instruments like accordions and marimba which led to the popularization of this repertory among the general population. In fact, some oral accounts inform that repertory from Chopin and Liszt was performed in the carpas using these percussion instruments. Granados, XX. Due to their suitability for small spaces, string quartets were also frequent ensembles at the carpas. For a description of the distribution of printed editions of European musical works in Latin America see, Hugo Quintana “La música de salón en Colombia y Venezuela, vista a través de las publicaciones periódicas de la segunda mitad del siglo XIX y las primeras décadas del siglo XX. A propósito de un ejercicio de historia musical comparada” in Albert Recassens Barberá and Christian Spencer eds., A tres bandas: mestizaje, sincretismo e hibridación en el espacio sonoro iberoamericano, (Tres Cantos: Akal, 2010), 91-102.

58 For a historical account of the split of jacalones de zarzuela and cinematographers see Juan Felipe Leal, Las teatros-salones : anales del cine en México, 1895-1911, Volumen I, primera parte. (México, D.F.: Juan Pablos : Voyeur, 2010).
most celebrated features of the tandas.\footnote{For more information on these songs see \textit{Serge Salaün, El cuplé (1900-1936)} (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1990). The affluence of Spanish companies travelling throughout most Latin American cities is accountable for the popularity of these songs in the American continent.} In opposition to the géneros grande and chico, these songs were known as \textit{género ínfimo} due to their brevity. Directly connected with the Madrilenian cabaret theatre, these songs were characterized by their piquant lyrics and humorous topics. Meanwhile, its erotic variant the “\textit{género psicalíptico}” was clearly infused with sexual innuendo and performed with playful erotic tinges.

As the political situation became more critical during the years of the Revolution, the content of these shows was gradually transformed to incorporate numbers that included biting political criticism. While preserving the same music styles of the Spanish cuplés, these musical numbers called revistas musicales, derided local authorities through parody acts. Meanwhile, comedians working in established musical theater venues often mocked authorities and commented on the turbulent political events ongoing in the capital city. Because some comedians transited between formal venues and carpa theaters, these musical comedy shows were shared between in the two circuits. Understandably, this raised the suspicion of local authorities that soon increased control and censorship in both places.

\textbf{Other Musical Repertories at the Carpas}

In the late nineteenth century, musics of black heritage from the Caribbean islands, especially danceable genres, had been adapted to Cuban musical theater. As Susan Thomas has explained, the Cuban zarzuelas of the late nineteenth century played a decisive role in popularizing Afro-Cuban genres by adapting their aesthetics to stylized forms more palatable to white audiences at a time...
when a time when Cuban society discriminated against practitioners of these musics.\textsuperscript{60} These zarzuelas were later performed in Mexico City and other Latin American capital cities, causing an international phenomenon of reevaluation of these marginalized cultures. As the newspaper \textit{El Monitor Republicano} reported in 1891,

\begin{quote}
All of a sudden, the negros were dancing the danzones from the scrubland and singing those voluptuous airs that are like the echo of the breeze that moves the coffee plantation … with each step the audience requested repetitions [of numbers], because they were enthusiastic about the dances of the negrillos.\textsuperscript{61}
\end{quote}

The success of genres such as the danzon, the rumba, Cuban habaneras, and the Colombian bambuco, was the cause that one could find these dances in formal theaters as much as in the small jacalones. Much to the dismay of the city’s authorities during the late Porfirian years people in Mexico’s capital were dancing the shimmy, the cakewalk and the rumba in ways that, as those authorities saw it, defied extant norms of “proper conduct.” Even more significantly, these musical and danced practices were open reminders of the presence of black cultures in the Capital city.

The presence of these racialized music genres in the theater-jacalones not only brought bad official reputation to the spectacles, but also gave perfect excuses to the Porfirian authorities, press journalists and music critics to construct local notions of the musically “uncivilized,” “immoral,” “primitive” or “poor.” All these categories that were in turn conflated with the “popular classes,” a term that figures of authority used to imagine the social groups who frequented the carpas. And because the modernizing process that Mexico City was undergoing since the Porfiriato also entailed that the use of public spaces for entertainment was regulated to fit the racist social stratification

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{60} Susan Thomas, \textit{Cuban Zarzuela : Performing Race and Gender on Havana's Lyric Stage}. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009).
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{61} “De repente, los negros bailaban los danzones de la manigua, y cantan esos aires voluptuosos que parecen el eco de la brisa que mueve el cafetal… a cada paso el público pide repeticiones porque le entusiasman las danzas de los negrillos.” \textit{El Monitor Republicano} (January 18\textsuperscript{th}, 1891).
\end{flushright}
lingering from colonial times, authorities considered that the practice of these dances in destitute neighborhoods was at least “normal.”

After the Revolution however, new ways of organizing society began to be conceived and new conceptions of social class were also encouraged. As a result, expressive cultures not only reflected this but in many ways also constructed it. These new understandings caused shifting attitudes towards the varied array of music genres vogue at the time, at least among the carpas audiences.

An international process of reevaluation of musics of black heritage began in the early twentieth century. If by the 1890s the “Afro-Antillean dances” had appeared as a curiosity in the zarzuelas performed at prestigious centers of entertainment, by the 1910s and 1920s tourists and businessmen from New York flocked to the cabarets and night clubs in the city of Havana to enjoy the performance of these dances. While treated as an exotic fixture, the success of these musical genres caused that they were gradually infused with a sense of cosmopolitanism; an association which was highly advantageous for carpas’ managers.

Likewise, in the late 1910s and 1920s, geographical proximity with the United States as well as the advancement of the recording industry led to intensive musical exchange between musicians from Southern US and Mexico, propelling the development of Mexican versions of black US genres such as foxtrot, ragtime, and swing.

The traditional musical genres of native Mexico underwent a comparable process of reevaluation as new understandings of local sonic identity were changing too. During the second half of the nineteenth century, sonecitos de la tierra, jarabes, and gustos – once associated with indigenous and hence marginal cultures – became the musical representatives of the “national sound.” Conservatory trained composers such as Manuel M. Ponce or Ricardo Castro used the melodies of these traditional songs as the basic material of their romantic-styled works. These
appropriations were also relevant for the composing of Mexican zarzuelas. Interested in the dissemination of nationalistic ideas, in its last decade the Porfirian government prompted composers working for the commercial musical-theaters to write zarzuelas with Mexican topics or, as they promoted them, “género nacional.” Stylistically similar to their Spanish counterparts, the national zarzuelas featured signifiers of the “Mexican” in a way that was similar to how composers of the Mexican romantic nationalism had done it.

After the Revolution both the corridos – narrative ballads used to spread news and myths about Revolutionary battles and figures – and the canción ranchera were incorporated to the musical repertory of the variety-salons and became the preferred musical expressions in the carpas. And if these traditional musics had previously coexisted with Spanish cuplés, the new nationalistic ideology soon rejected the European songs in favor of the Mexican ones. The corridos ended up creating an entire epic view of the armed struggle and a vivid imaginary of Mexican rural identity. Meanwhile, the canción ranchera, infused with a romantic imaginary of the countryside, was conveniently fitted to the project of the agrarian reforms advanced by the post-Revolutionary governments between the

---

62 The corrido of the Revolution has merited the interest of numerous scholars, perhaps becoming one of the genres of Mexican popular music that has merited most publications. Pioneer in the study of the literary and musical constituents of the corrido is the work of Vicente T. Mendoza, El romance español y el corrido mexicano: estudio comparativo. (México: Ediciones de la Universidad Nacional Autónoma, 1939), El Corrido de la Revolución mexicana. (México, 1956). Lírica narrativa de México: el corrido. (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1964). These songs have also called the attention of numerous writers interested in the connections between their lyrical content and factual history. Armando de María y Campos, La revolución mexicana a través de los corridos populares. (México: 1962); Corrido histórico mexicano: voy a cantarles la historia (compiler) Antonio Avitia Hernández. (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1997-1998); Merle E. Simmons, The Mexican Corrido As a Source for Interpretive Study of Modern Mexico, 1870-1950 (Bloomington, Ind: Indiana University Press, 1957). More recently, the Mexican corrido has been studied as an important component in the imaginaries of migrant communities. See, Sánchez, Martha I. C. Corridos in Migrant Memory. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Ma. Luisa de la Garza, Ni aquí ni allá: el emigrante en los corridos y en otras canciones populares. (Cádiz: Fundación Municipal de Cultura, Excmo. Ayuntamiento de Cádiz, 2007). Alternative approaches to the study of the corrido have included the work of María Herrera-Sobek. The Mexican Corrido: A Feminist Analysis. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Guillermo Hernández, “New Perspectives on the corrido” in Ballads and Boundaries: Narrative Singing in an Intercultural Context ed. James Porter, 28-36 (Los Angeles, Department of Ethnomusisology and Systematic Musicology, UCLA. However, it has been the variant subgenre narco-corrido that has given this musical practice its current salience among academic circles and media.
1920s and 1940s. Similarly, the South American tango, spread throughout the Americas thanks to Carlos Gardel’s sound records, was well received in Mexico. Its narratives of marginal neighborhoods in the cities of Buenos Aires and Montevideo may have been appealing to the carpas’ audiences.

The Carpas and their Music after 1930s

With such an array of musical expressions, it was only expected that in the 1930s the newly founded radio stations invited many carpas singers were invited to perform and record. Some of these stations were the XEB and the XEW. Towards the 1950s, and as theater comedy became preeminent in the carpas, the shows once offered in the small itinerant jacalones were transferred to permanent and bigger theaters. Their main actors and musicians were gradually co-opted by the nascent industry of film and TV entertainment, to further advance the nationalistic project; in the process they were irreversibly transformed becoming central for the development of the local popular culture. During these years, a music genre much applauded at the carpas was the Cuban bolero. These romantic songs were widely performed in carpas, cabarets and acquired a Mexican identity of their own, with Agustín Lara (1897-1970) as one of their most important representatives. The bolero, along with the tango, was one of the musical genres most typically associated with the popular imaginary of the Mexican national identity. William Gradante, “El Hijo del Pueblo: José Alfredo Jiménez and the Mexican Canción Ranchera” *Latin American Music Review* 3, (1982), no.1: 36-59.

---

63 These romantic songs, originally composed for one singer and guitar, were later associated with the mariachi bands made famous by the Mexican film industry of the 1950s. Since then, they have become a quintessential element of the popular imaginary of the Mexican national identity. William Gradante, “El Hijo del Pueblo: José Alfredo Jiménez and the Mexican Canción Ranchera” *Latin American Music Review* 3, (1982), no.1: 36-59.

64 Carlos Gardel's successful recording career lasted from 1918 to his untimely death in a plane crash accident in 1935. Tango songs outnumbered many other popular songs he recorded, and after 1923 the tango practically swamped everything else in his recording career. Simon Collier, *The Life, Music & Times of Carlos Gardel.* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1986). Concerning the reception of Argentinean tango in Mexico City see chapter five of this dissertation.

carpas during their second stage. The uses and development of these two lyric genres is however outside of my dissertation’s purview.

“The carpa is always preferable to the pulquería”: Public entertainment, pulquerías and the prejudice against carpas and their audiences.

At the end of his regime, the authority of Díaz began to weaken, and criticism of his authoritarian measures increased; therefore, during the last decade of his term, he softened his once strict governing policies, most of which had been designed to prevent opposition. This relaxation had a positive effect on the city’s image, making it seem more progressive. As a result, an increased public sociability, even in the night-time, was permitted by authorities; at the same time, however, constant observation and policing of decorum in public spaces became characteristic of social life during these years. Typically, public activities were rigorously supervised in order to ensure that they respected the established boundaries of “order” and “morality.” Public balls, parades, open-air concerts, inauguration of public works and new transportation technologies would serve as ways to boast about the country’s prosperity, while giving a reassuring sense of political stability.

In the midst of the ongoing project of urban development, the furtive conditions under which the carpas companies operated gave authorities an excuse to characterize the carpas shows in belittling terms, even though their repertory was not too different from that offered in formal venues. Officers and critics considered the carpas’ musical and theatrical scene “marginal” with respect to “legitimate” options hosted in established theaters, such as zarzuelas, operas and avant-
garde theater. And while zarzuela de género chico was the main attraction in both the carpas and formal theaters during this time, its alternation in the jaca\lones with other musical genres – such as sones, jarabes and corridos, associated with social groups like peasants and Indians, or Afro Caribbean dances associated with black people – contributed to build a stigma around these shows. It was in this context of social polarization and ideological change that the carpas represented a unique space of sociability, one that allows historians to observe how these “less prestigious” musical practices put tension on the ideal of progress that the Porfirian elites desired for the city.

Official prejudice against the musics performed at the carpas, paired with a preconception about the people that visited them, conditioned public conceptions of the carpas as inherently connected to the “poor” and the “uncivilized.” Nothing illustrates this point better than the legal arguments offered by inspectors of the Office of Public Entertainment, a subsidiary of the Ayuntamiento office created since colonial times, in order to keep strict control over these shows:

> There are ten [official] theaters in the city, and they must have constantly [present] an authority, in the absence of the regidores [supervisors], for which [reason] it is necessary that they stay in [the theaters], that is, one [regidor] designated for each theater. There are ten carpas, and more even than the theaters, given the special public that attends them, they need the constant vigilance of Municipal Authority; an inspector is necessary in each one.68

The inspector’s suggestion of a greater surveillance on the carpas was based on a tacit preconception about the carpas’ “special audiences.” The euphemism is clarified by analyzing a second report provided by another inspector, Hipólito Amor:

> Since it is to be considered that the audiences attending these shows are in general terms of the low class of society and that to stay two or three hours in these carpas they pay extremely low prices, a way must be found for these kind of shows not to disappear, for the carpa is always preferable to the pulquería and the tavern, where with absolute certainty they spend more money and waste themselves more;

---

68 “Los teatros de la ciudad son diez y deben tener constantemente una autoridad a falta de los cc. regidores por lo que es necesario su permanencia en éstos, o sea designado uno para cada teatro. Las carpas son diez y más todavía que los teatros, por el público especial que a ellas concurre, necesitan la constante vigilancia de la Autoridad Municipal siendo necesario un inspector en cada una.” Translations and italics are mine unless otherwise stated. Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal- Sección de Diversiones Públicas (hereafter, AHDF-SDP) Vol. 812 File 1706, Foja 8.
even if the carpa does not uplift them, at least people are healthily amused, and less immorally than at those centers of vice [the pulquerías]. Italics are mine.

While Amor is unambiguous about his view of the carpas’ audience as “the low class of society,” his recommendation for the preservation of these shows responds to a different but related anxiety. María Toxqui has shown how the Porfiriato marked a generalized period of concern for pulquerías, or local pulque bars. Pulque, a traditional prehispanic drink made of the fermented sap of the maguey plant, seemingly bore undesirable traces of Indian cultures that resisted modernity. Even if the drink was popular among most social sectors; authorities seem to have overlooked the fact that refined gentlemen also drank it when they blamed pulque for public drunkenness, and the poor classes for the lack of civilization. Pulque houses existed in various guises: as traditional local drinking houses, as well as fancy establishments offering a variety of pulque blended with seasonal fruits, locally called curados. Although these establishments caused inebriation among the wealthy as well as among the poor, it was the sight of drunken Indians sleeping in the streets and newly refurbished plazas that compromised the image the elites desired for the city (one can assume that the drunken rich would stay indoors in the fancy pulque houses, or just go home in the after hours).

In addition, these were the years when the beer industry, which marketed its drink as a “higher-class beverage,” started to flourish in Mexico. Therefore a negative campaign against pulque, associating it with poor and marginal people, would have a direct effect in the transformation of the drinking preferences of the middle class and the elites, who would presumably have been inspired to

---

69 “Como es muy de tenerse en cuenta que el público que asiste a estos espectáculos es en general de la clase baja del pueblo, y pagan por permanecer dos o tres horas en dichas carpas cuotas sumamente bajas, hay que buscar un medio de que no desaparezcan esta clase de espectáculos, pues es siempre preferible la carpa a la pulquería y la taberna, donde con absoluta seguridad pagan más y se embrutecen más, puesto que en la carpa, si no se ilustran sanamente y menos inmoralmente que en los centros de vicio.” Hipólito Amor, AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, File 1708 (August 29, 1922).

switch to beer, as it supposedly corresponded to their social status.\textsuperscript{71} The authorities’ view that the “poor” and “uneducated” were naturally prone to alcoholism and fighting, led them to authorize street theater as a means of controlling and reducing undesirable behaviors. These views were in turn connected to changing ideas about labor. As capitalism advanced, authorities increasingly interpreted social activities such as drinking and gathering in public spaces as “vagrancy.” Therefore, as Amor’s report suggests, while pulque houses were considered centers of vice, the carpas were seen as a sort of containment, where people who wanted to socialize would amuse themselves “less immorally” and perhaps more productively—whatever that meant for authorities.

Such preconceptions about the social function of the carpas were also plausibly connected to the ancient colonial uses of theater as a vehicle for religious instruction and moral education. The idea of theater as a “civilizing” instrument was frequent among missionaries, who saw in staged performances, especially those with music, a viable way to convert people to the Catholic faith and educate them in its principles. This point is well illustrated by the proliferation of musical-theater genres such as pastorelas and villancicos during the sixteenth century. Conviction in the reforming power of theater remained so strong in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that colonial authorities continued to promote the development of official, secular theater through the \textit{Real Coliseo de México} and similar institutions.\textsuperscript{72}

During the colonial period and after it, official forms of theater were only ever part of the picture. Artistic activities performed in the streets combined with preexisting indigenous artistic expressions. Juggling, acrobatic acts, puppetry and many other practices were the marginal counterpart to official theater, or as Maya Ramos Smith has called it, “the proletariat of theatrical

\textsuperscript{71} María del Carmen Reyna and Jean Paul Krammer, \textit{Apuntes para la historia de la cerveza en México.} (México: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2012).

\textsuperscript{72} Hugo Hernán Ramírez, \textit{Fiesta, espectáculo y teatralidad en el México de los conquistadores} (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2009).
entertainment.” And yet, because civil authorities believed that street entertainment had positive effects on the population, it was allowed and even encouraged in certain public celebrations.

In the late nineteenth century, journalists and music critics reproduced conceptions about the corrective and instructive functions of theater at the carpas. And while such views increased tolerance for the existence of these shows in the city, they also contributed to build a stigma around the people that frequented them, as this 1929 commentary by the journalist Rafael Cardona suggests.

The carpa, due to its special nature, is theater for the people: theater for the worker who, coming out of the factory, needs to laugh, to think and to find entertainment in the nonchalance of simple comedy; and it is probable that, when the carpas work regularly, these people do not go to the pulquería to stultify and annihilate themselves but instead, paying a few cents, they attend the carpas with their friends.

Institutional Organization of Mexico City: The Ayuntamiento and the Office of Public Entertainment

The measures to control and regulate the carpas, as well as the social interactions that took place in them, cannot be possibly conceived without the intervention of the Ayuntamiento. The Ayuntamiento office was the most important legislative and administrative organ in Mexico City since its creation in 1522. During colonial times this institution controlled all civil affairs. The “Cabildo de la ciudad” was its chair, subordinate only to a representative of the King of Spain who bore one of three titles: Governor, Mayor (Alcalde mayor) or Corregidor.

Organized in different sections that performed different functions, the Ayuntamiento was created to impart justice and order. Civil and religious celebrations, public leisure activities, and the collection of taxes generated from their revenues, were all coordinated and controlled by the section


“La carpa, por su carácter especial, es teatro para el pueblo: teatro para el obrero que al salir de la fábrica necesita reír, pensar y entretenese en el teatro desenfadado de la comedia simple; y es probable que, cuando las carpas funcionen regularmente, no vaya a la pulquería a embruteecerse y aniquilarse, sino que por unos cuantos centavos se dirija a las carpas con los amigos.” Rafael Cardona, “El teatro popular en México” in *Revista de Revistas* (February 3rd, 1929).
of Public Entertainment, since colonial times (most clearly from early seventeenth century) up until the mid-twentieth century. It is this section of the Ayuntamiento that maintained the civil registers and thus the written archives of the carpas. The organizational chart below (Fig 1.1) gives a sense of the hierarchical order by which the Ayuntamiento worked and interacted with the carpas people for most of the nineteenth century.

From 1890 until the year 1901, one single, solitary commissioner directed both the Section of Public Entertainment and the Police Department. This conditioned in many ways not only how the carpas were controlled and regulated, but also how their musical activities and participants were historically inscribed.

**Figure 1.1 Structure of Administrative Power**

---

75 The institutional mechanisms that colonial authorities used to control entertainment activities have been described by Maya Ramos Smith, *Los artistas de la feria y de la calle*, Op. cit and Hugo Hernán Ramírez, *Fiesta, espectáculo y teatralidad*, Op. cit.
In continuity with colonial mechanisms of control and discipline, the legal documents containing the regulations for the control of activities at the carpas and other centers of entertainment were the Official Regulation of Public Entertainment and the Official Regulation of Theaters.\(^76\) In colonial times, these documents had endowed colonial authorities, through the Office of Public Entertainment, with the power to ensure that public entertainment in the city respected “the good norms of decency, decorum and correctness, both in what concerned the repertory performed, as well as among audience members.”\(^77\) The Official Regulation of Public Theaters and the Regulation of Entertainment remained in use through the end of nineteenth century and into the start of the twentieth century; both were re-issued in 1894, and amended shortly after the Revolution in 1913. The Regulation of Theaters mainly ensured the “decency” of the repertory, and guaranteed that the infrastructure of formal theaters responded to the standards desired for the city. This last regulation was also applied to the carpas, though not without adjustments, due to the obvious infrastructural differences between the formal theaters and the jacalones. In 1922, a new official Regulation of Entertainment was published to fit the interest of the post-Revolutionary governments in controlling the content of the repertory.

In conformity with the histories of most institutions in Mexico, the Ayuntamiento archive was not immune to the abrupt political changes brought about by the Revolution. The political stability of the Porfirian years had permitted a clear organization of the civil registers. This was reflected, for example, in commissioners’ staying for at least four years in each position, or in the

\(^76\) Because of the fear of revolts and insurrections was constant during colonial times, numerous such documents were issued by the colonial government. Examples of these regulations, and of the sanctions for not complying with them, are commonly found at the Archivo de Indias, in Seville, Spain, and at the AHDF-SDP. For a commentary on the disciplining function of these documents, see Pérez Toledo and Madrid Mulla, Gran baile de pulgas…. For a study on public festivities, regulations and people’s disobedience of regulations in colonial Mexico City see Hugo Hernán Ramírez, Fiesta, espectáculo y teatralidad.

\(^77\) Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas, “Don Bernardo de Gálvez Conde de Gálvez”, México: April, 11th, 1786, 796, Legajo 1, exp. 3. Quoted in Pérez Toledo y Madrid Mulla, Gran baile de pulgas…
yearly publication of the *Memoires of the Ayuntamiento*, a public document that allowed citizens (and now historians) to verify the official reports of the projects undertaken each year, as well as investigate the finances of each department. By contrast, the outburst of the Revolution and the political chaos it brought during its armed phase between 1911 and 1917, clearly affected the institutional and administrative order of the Ayuntamiento, and caused severe gaps in the archive. While problematic in terms of continuity, these gaps allow one to clearly see the contrasts in public administration and public entertainment policies before and after the Revolution. Absences in the documentation also reveal, through the very fact of their absence, which activities were considered unimportant by authorities. In this work I try to fill out the fragments with inferences and informed speculations in every case when the sources do not allow for a more decisive conclusion. I hypothesize about the reasons why some events, people or musical activities that we know quite well lived, breathed, and took place, were not documented, or in case they did, have not made it to the historical narratives of music.

**Inspectors and Councilors**

Because the enforcement of Official Regulations of Theaters and of Entertainment entailed the participation of inspectors and councilors, these men were in direct and habitual contact with the people and activities in and around the carpas. Appointed by the Porfirian Office of Entertainment for renewable periods of four years, inspectors and councilors closely monitored the activities at the carpas. These representatives of local authority personally attended the theaters during shows, ensuring that they were in acceptable conditions of operation, or that their installations and inner activities did not compromise public safety, orderliness, morality and propriety of behavior, whatever these things meant for the officer in charge. As a result, the inspectors’ and councilors’ jobs often entailed censorship, levying fines, and corrective punishments. At this point in the history
of the Ayuntamiento, the inspectors were not necessarily highly educated people or “intellectuals,” in the sense that they were not involved in cultural production such as writing and publishing. Most of the time, inspectors lived near the downtown area, and were concerned with what they thought to be the “well being” of society. Therefore, they offered their services to the Ayuntamiento office to help in regulating public activities. As employees of the state, these inspectors were devoted to public service, and because they were figures of authority, they could control the cultural practices at the carpas shows. What this meant in the little world of the carpas is that because they often lived nearby and often exercised their official functions among the carpas for years at a stretch, these inspectors and councilors were well acquainted with the people with whom they sustained legal and administrative interactions. This also meant that person-to-person negotiations were possible, and that circumvention of official procedures could have taken place.\textsuperscript{78}

In 1921, the city’s government created an organization called the \textit{Council of Culture and Arts}; and with it the function of these inspectors changed. The council was a regulatory organism made up of the most visible and self-proclaimed intellectuals of the country, which is to say people with university educations, writers, poets, actors and musicians, in charge of institutions such as orchestras, museums, artistic societies, literary associations, etc. The council, initially directed by orchestra conductor Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, claimed to “supervise the good quality and artistic merit of the shows offered in the Capital city.” Therefore, many of the former carpas inspectors were fired and replaced by people whom the intellectuals of the Council of Culture and Arts thought to be “better qualified” to judge the edifying quality and artistic worth of the shows.\textsuperscript{79} This gave

\textsuperscript{78} Based on her own interviews to actors from the second stage of the carpas (1930-1950) Socorro Merlín describes the type of censorship taking place in these shows. This allows inferences on how censorship mechanisms worked too during the first stage too. See Socorro Merlín “La censura en las carpas de México” in Documenta CITRU: Teatro Mexicano e Investigación. Carpeta especial Teatro y censura. (Noviembre 1995), 45-48.

place to numerous sanctions or recommendations for change based on value judgments inspired by personal taste.

Throughout this dissertation I deal with inspectors and councilors of the Public Entertainment Office as figures that mediate between the local government and the people of the carpas, be they the owners of courtyards or vacant lots, entrepreneurs, actors, musicians or audience members. By virtue of their mediating position, I consider the carpas inspectors’ role analogous to that of missionaries of the early colonial period. Inspectors, like missionaries, lived and worked in the interstices of two cultures, thus pertaining to both. While representing the local government, inspectors simultaneously negotiated, and in some cases sympathized, with members of the carpas’ community. And because of their recurrent presence in the carpas, they were cognizant of and even genuinely enjoyed the music variety shows offered in these modest theaters. This was true to the extent that in 1921 the Ayuntamiento office had to issue a commandment to “restrain free access to inspectors to those shows for which they had not been appointed.” At the same time, the inspectors often firmly believed in the need to “civilize” or “urbanize” people at the shows, and therefore took legal measures to accomplish this. Their reports and recommendations therefore constitute a rich repertory that allows us to observe the mentality that their time and appointed mission accorded them. Deconstructing these officers’ often conflicted perspectives offers us insights into the effects of colonized subjectivities of the nineteenth and early twentieth century in Mexico City.

80 AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, File 1680.
PART II. Material Culture, Labor and Social Relationships at the Carpas

Carpas as a Working Alternative

In the early twentieth century, the carpas acted as both an entertainment option for people who could not go to formal theaters, and as a source of income for many other people. This posits the carpas not simply as an educational form of public entertainment, a containment mechanism to prevent delinquency and drunkenness as Porfirian authorities had conceived of it, but also as an economic activity that served certain people as a means of survival, especially in the perilous economic context of the post Revolution.

After the Revolution the reasons to authorize and tolerate the carpas palpably changed. Administrative dialogues sustained between the officers of Public Entertainment and the people who requested permits to install carpas during and especially after the Revolution, suggests that authorization for working in the streets responded not only to the new government’s populist political orientation – expressed through an interest in supplying the city with inexpensive entertainment – but that it also responded to a basic and generalized need for employment in the post-revolutionary economic crisis. Furthermore, official tolerance of the carpas that offered more audacious musical repertory helped to showcase the clear shift in moral and religious values that the post-Revolutionary government represented.

If the teatros-jacalones emerged simultaneously as a cheaper alternative to fulfill the demand for musical entertainment in the city and as a source of income for the unemployed, it is worth comparing the financial conditions in the carpas to that in the formal theaters. Making this comparison will facilitate understanding of why and how poverty was projected into these theaters and their people.
For instance, María Teresa Careaga Soriano, a theater lover and a city chronicler of the decade of the twenties, remembers the carpas simply as “revista theaters with fewer resources” which, if anything, she describes as picturesque spaces.”

Very picturesque carpas proliferated everywhere. “Two tandas for one ticket”, an individual announced, shouting at its door. One entered a small shack with several rows of rickety chairs and a small stage where modest cuplé singers, dancers, singers and comedians showcased their artistic virtues. Two of these carpas, located in the Streets of the Santa María la Redonda neighborhood, came to outshine the rest: the “Salón Mayab” and “Ofelia.”

How much cheaper the carpas were in comparison with formal theaters cannot be established with certainty. Nevertheless, surviving information of specific cases registered in the decade of the 1920s allows some inferences of the portable theaters’ inner economy. A case in point is the request presented to the Ayuntamiento Office on November 8th, 1921 by Enrique Valdíez, a neighbor of the downtown area and who reported to live in the 5th street of Tacuba. Mr. Valdíez solicited the establishment of a carpa for music varieties and comedy in the nearby neighborhood of Santa María La Redonda, in a lot located in the address 6ta del Chopo No. 195. (For a reference to the neighborhoods in downtown see Map of the city published in 1926 in Appendix 1). Although he was not the owner of the lot, he had arranged on a partnership with Miss Carmen Volante, the alleged owner. His request was approved. Typed at the bottom line of the document, the official approval indicates: “Issue the permit and charge a fee of 30.00 pesos for the right of license while also demanding a payment of 300.00 pesos to guarantee the taxation that must be met in compliance with the law.”


82 “Expídase cobrando $30.00 por derecho de licencia y exigiéndosele el depósito de $300.00 para garantizar el pago de los impuestos que conforme a la ley debe cubrir.” The requester was then addressed to the Comisión de Hacienda/Comisión de Diversiones. AHDF- SDP, Volume 821, File 1, (1921).
Mr. Valdédz’ petition is placed first in a volume holding similar requests to establish temporary entertainment activities in the downtown streets. According to these records, the price for a single license to establish a carpa theater ranged from fifteen to thirty pesos, while the taxation fee depended on factors such as the size of the carpa, the amount of people it could host, as well as the entrance fee and the time span during which the license was valid, which could last from two weeks to two months.\(^8^3\) Judging by the authorized requests kept in this volume, the criteria for monetary charges was neither fixed nor self-evident. Mr. Valdédz’ intended carpa, for instance, seems to have been a larger one since the deposit fee before taxation was three hundred pesos, a rather high fee at the time.

One of the requests that intrigued me the most is a petition by a man named Mr. Genaro Roque. Because the 1920s were a time of transition to typing machines, at least in official documentation, Roque’s hand-written application stands out as unusual. The request is written in a well-accomplished calligraphy typical of educated people in the nineteenth century (Fig. 1.2).\(^8^4\) Paradoxically, his plea is also characterized by obvious spelling mistakes and by a direct and concise style that seems abnormal, I would even say disrespectful, when compared with the convoluted rhetorical style used for legal argumentation at the time.

Most typically during these years, people who needed to dialogue with authorities about the regulation of public space, working opportunities or modifications to their business, and who were either illiterate or simply unfamiliar with the style of such negotiations, would do it by using the services of public scribes. These public servers were concentrated in the eponymous Square of the scribes (Plaza de los escribanos) in front of the church of Santo Domingo. Nonetheless, judging from the fact that his signature is clearly of a piece with the rest of the calligraphy, it seems that Mr.

\(^8^3\) AHDF - SDP, Vol. 821, File 1, (1921).

Roque did not, or could not hire the services of a scribe and decided instead to do the request without recourse to intermediaries.

**Figure 1.2.** Request to install a cotton tent written by Mr. Genaro Roque, AHDF-SDP Volume 821, (April 19th 1921).
Certain words in his requests are underlined with pencil (most likely by the officers at the Public Entertainment Office) highlighting his name, the location where he intended to settle his provisional theater, the sort of activities he proposed and, most noticeably, the fact that his carpa was of cotton (manta), instead of the customary canvas. Seemingly, the sum of the sincerity of his request, his presumed social condition (suggested by his difficulty in achieving a suitable linguistic performance) as well as the humble material of which his tent was made, persuaded the authorities not only to approve Roque’s request, but also to charge him the unusually low fee of ten pesos. The odd combination of an educated handwriting with poor rhetorical skills is not enough to conclude about Roque’s social condition. Similarly, an isolated case is insufficient to draw conclusions about the criteria used by Ayuntamiento officers to grant requests and charge. However, one possible explanation is that the gesture of charging this man a lower amount for a carpa installation permit could have responded to a consideration for those who struggled with the financial hardships that resulted from the introduction of a new economic system. Roque’s requests, thus hints at the possibility that the license fee for installing a carpa could be reduced, seemingly as a consideration to the disadvantageous economic standing of the applicant as well as to the viability of the project. Because the request dates from 1921, this special consideration may have been connected to the changing politics of the post-Revolution period, which claimed to have a more populist orientation.

The disparity in the prices of the permits granted to Mr. Valdez and Mr. Roque suggests that granting of such permits responded to an idiosyncratic approach whereby individual parties negotiated in person. Most likely then, the regulation of the carpas was an à la carte business that responded to the needs and wants of the individual parties involved.
Taxes and Fines

As the carpas grew progressively but steadily more popular they were able to generate considerable sums of money, regardless of their fame as “poor” theaters. This unexpected virtue was soon noticed and acted upon by taxation officers, especially after the Revolution. While a case can be made for the Office of Public Entertainment’s growing efforts to discipline the city and its dwellers, the compulsion for order and control can also be attributed to the juicy profits that said office obtained from many carpa theaters. The income that came to the Office of Public Entertainment in the form of taxation, licenses, and fines was an obvious incentive to the local government to keep the carpas closely supervised: perceived abuses and violations of the Regulations substantially enriched the Ayuntamiento’s coffers.  

For example, when reporting on the New Regulation of Public Entertainment of the year 1922, the city’s mayor Miguel Alonzo Romero demagogically celebrated his success in disciplining the scene of entertainment while also transparently revealing his interest: “With this Regulation, the City’s government has managed to discipline entertainment in general, thus favoring the general public. We have collected, through fines for infractions to the Regulation, from January 1st to October 15th, the sum of $2,520.00.” The sum was equivalent to the total budget needed to finance the official flower contest celebrated that same year, an event in which all highly ranked politicians participated. More evidence of the city’s financial interest in controlling the carpas is in the yearly report of the Ayuntamiento for the year 1927. In this report, the section of Public

---

85 In 1927 the carpas were reported to be the second most profitable entertainment activity for the Ayuntamiento office, after film houses. This represented a clear, but by no means abrupt, shift from earlier periods when bullfights and musical shows at formal theaters had been the principal sources of taxation for the Office of Public Entertainment. See Memorias del Ayuntamiento, 1927 (México: Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 1927), 225.

86 “Con este reglamento se han logrado disciplinar las diversiones en general y beneficiar al público. Habiéndose recaudado por concepto de infracciones, del 1ro de enero al 15 de octubre, la cantidad de $2,520.00.” Miguel Alonzo Romero, Un año de sitio en la presidencia municipal, 282.

87 Idem.
Entertainment was carefully subdivided in terms of how much each form of entertainment had represented to the city’s Ayuntamiento in the form of taxation.

A variety of spectacles, which included zarzuela shows and carpa varieties settled in the different neighborhoods; dances, cock fights, boxing, circus, football [soccer] games, concerts and public festivities [jamaicas] resulted in an income of $108,177.43 corresponding to four thousand five hundred and twenty-five different shows […] Entertainment programs authorized and sealed by the Ayuntamiento Office in the year 1927 reached [a sum of] $19,464, [with the programs] distributed as follows: movie theaters 13,143; theater shows 2,269; carpas, 2,632; cock fights 231; bull fights 61; circus shows, 474; boxing 108; football [soccer] 66; concerts 41; ball games 66.88

This report provides a figure for the “distribution of the programs:” in other words, the number of different shows that each entertainment modality offered to their audiences that year, all of which together amounted to a total of 4,525 different shows. After film houses, the carpas were the entertainment activity that represented the highest profits for the Ayuntamiento office collected through taxation and permits— even higher than those for the musical shows offered in formal theatres. This not only suggests the extent to which the carpas represented a real competition to established theaters, but also reveals the financial reasons why the carpas were so valued by the local government.

And since, apparently, the shows in these theaters had a greater potential to incur infractions to the established regulations, fines also represented a source of income for the regulatory office. The Official Government’s statistics report, published retrospectively in 1930, declared that from 1922 to 1930 the carpas were closely monitored for taxation purposes.89 The local government interest in fining carpa companies must have been so intense that fines were issued for faults such as

88 “Los espectáculos varios, consistentes en funciones de zarzuela y variedades de carpa instaladas en los barrios, bailes, peleas de gallos, encuentros de box, circos, juegos de foot-ball, conciertos y jamaicas, etc. dieron un ingreso de $108,177.43 por cuatro mil quinientos veinticinco espectáculos diversos. […] Los programas de diversiones autorizados y sellados por el Ayuntamiento en el año de 1927 llegaron a $19,464. distribuidos [los programas] así: Cines:13,143; Funciones teatrales: 2,269; Carpas: 2,632; Peleas de gallos: 231; Corridas de toros: 61; Funciones de circo , 474; Encuentros de Box.: 108; Foot-ball: 66; Conciertos: 41; Partidos de pelota: 66.” Memorias del Ayuntamiento, 1927. (México: Gobierno del Distrito Federal, 1927), 225.

89 Of a total of 197 entertainment centers, the census reports 149 carpas in all the country, of which 56 are settled in the Distrito Federal. This includes a category for non-classified entertainment venues.” Anuario de Estadística 1930, 272.
not being able to show proof of the authorized and sealed program, for allowing people to smoke inside and, most commonly, for starting or finishing in later hours than those announced or permitted.\textsuperscript{90} Since such misdemeanors were considered less serious, a fine of only five pesos would apply. Contrastingly, when inspectors considered a serious moral fault had been committed, they charged a higher, symbolically punitive amount (For an example of a fine to a carpa theater see Appendix 2).

This was as true for musical shows in formal theaters as it was for the carpas. An example of an exceptionally large fine for musical entertainment in an established theater was that charged to Manuel Sanza, manager of the formal revista theater Virginia Fábregas, for “having staged a highly immoral show.” As it turned out, the offense had consisted in having staged a parody of current politicians.\textsuperscript{91} The amount of three hundred pesos was unusually high even for an established company working in a prestigious theater. At the other end of the social scale, in what concerned the carpas, a fine of twenty pesos, customary in cases of infraction, represented a considerable decimation to the nightly profits.\textsuperscript{92}

\textbf{Economics at the Carpas}

The distribution of profits at the carpas is a fruitful place to inquire into the carpas as an economic activity, as well as into their inner social organization. Numerous photographs of the carpas’ façades during the 1920s reveal interesting data: the entrance fee per tanda, the variety acts that made up the show, the main musical acts to be offered that night (typically a one-act zarzuela) as well as the main

\textsuperscript{90} AHDF- SDP, Vol. 824, (1921).

\textsuperscript{91} “Fine to Theater Virginia Fábregas.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 825, File 7.

\textsuperscript{92} Numerous references to this practice may be found in AHDF- SDP, Vol. 825.
performers, those whom oral histories also refer to as the “star of the night”. In an oral account, actor Guadalupe Martínez “Caralimpia” remembered:

Programs were organized in tandas. One tanda lasted from twenty minutes to an hour. A dancer, a singer or a parodist performed. We would do two variety tandas and one sketch. Almost always we would perform three tandas, hence the call “this and two more for a single ticket”. If the carpa attracts enough people, we do two tandas instead of three. It depends on the relationship one establishes with the audience.  

A close look at a photograph of the Carpa Salón Variedades, shown in Figure 1.3 below, may kindle our imagining the economic and musical culture at the carpas. In 1928, when this picture was taken, this carpa settled in the plaza del Carmen, at what in those years was the intersection of Carmen, República de Nicaragua and Apartado streets (the last an extension of República de Uruguay). This was located seven blocks north of the Cathedral and three blocks south of the plaza de Tepito (See Fig 1.4).

Figure 1.3. “Salón Variedades in Plaza del Carmen” (1928). Museo Archivo de Fotografía, No. 44668 3-2.

93 “Los programas se organizaban por tandas. Una tanda duraba de veinte minutos a una hora. Se presentaba una bailarina, un cantante, un parodista. Se hacían dos tandas de variedad y el sketch. Casi siempre se daban tres tandas, por eso se gritaba “esta y dos por un solo boleto”. Si la carpa jala, se meten dos tandas en vez de tres, depende mucho de la relación con el público.” Guadalupe Martínez “Caralimpia” in Merlin, Vida y milagros, 100.
Figure 1.3.b “Detail of the frontis of Carpa Variedades”

Figure 1.4. Location of the Salón carpa Variedades (Excerpted from Map 1926)
Displayed in the façade of the carpa Variedades is a poster left over from the night before, announcing the debut of soprano (tiple) Juanita Campa on Tuesday night. The announcement for “today Wednesday from 5 to 11pm” lists the género chico zarzuelas *Los Campesinos, Método Goritz*, *Un crimen misterioso* and *La Maruja*. As it can be observed, the numbers were organized in four tandas, with these four musical numbers being the main attraction in each tanda.

The price per tanda was of twenty-five cents in the luneta section, which was the one closer to the stage and where people could sit. By paying twice as much, anyone in the in this part of the jacalón could stay for the next tanda, an option known as “Permanencia voluntaria.” In contrast, people in the cheaper galleria section would stand up and pay five cents for one tanda. By adding five more cents, people in this section would be able to stay for a second show.

Authorities of the period considered that people paid “extremely low prices” to attend to the carpas, a consideration that also shaped their expectations of the people’s behavior.\(^94\) Low as these fees may seem, the officers’ appreciations are not sufficient for us to be able to determine if the price for a carpas variety show was cheap in its own day. This is partly due to biased economic record-keeping. For example, the late Porfirian regime reported buoyant numbers in macroeconomic terms, but did not occupy itself with documenting the cost of living for common people. An accurate assessment of the price of entry to a carpa show with respect to common people’s purchasing power in the first part of the twentieth century exceeds both the purpose of this chapter and my training as a musicologist. Yet I can offer some inferences I have been able to cull from the data I have examined. If anything, they will allow us to make some informed speculations about why authorities and local writers perceived the carpas shows to be ‘cheap.’

By comparing entry prices (as reported in requests for installations permits) in the first decade of the century to those from 1921 and 1928, one can notice that the prices for cheaper seats

---
\(^94\) AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, File 1708.
in the carpas did not change (Fig. 1.5). Nevertheless the more expensive seats in the luneta section showed an increase of 150% over this same period. This may have been due to the carpas’ growing popularity with the middle class; and this suggests in turn that the diversification of the audience was something of which carpa managers took economic advantage.

**Figure 1.5** Variation in the prices of carpas shows between 1910 and 1920 (pesos per tanda)\(^95\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Price per tanda according to seat</th>
<th>Prior to 1910</th>
<th>1921</th>
<th>1928</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gallery</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>No data</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luneta</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average price</td>
<td>0.075</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>75 (average)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Economic Changes in Mexico, 1890-1930: an Overview**

The economic changes in Mexican society between 1890 and 1930 were intense and responded to different causes. While approximate wage levels prior to the Revolution have been derived from historical records, the conditions of forced labor, exploitation and peonage during the Porfiriato makes it almost impossible for the historian to know whether working people prior to the Revolution received the earnings they supposedly earned. On top of that, the widespread system of *tiendas de raya* — credit stores owned by the patron and where workers where forced to buy through a system of redeemable coupons, also obscures historical knowledge of the price of living during this period. Not only the price of products was inflated in these stores but also the high level of illiteracy among workers made easier for the store administrators to garble with the workers’ salaries as well as with the collection of credit payments.\(^96\) These factors were all important in leading up to the

---

\(^95\) Source: The charts on the approximate prices of carpas are my own elaboration with data obtained from civil registers in AHDF-SDP as well as from photographs of carpas from the Museo Archivo de Fotografía (MAF). See AHDF-SDP, Vol. 821, file December 10th, 1921; MAF, No. 44668 3-2.

\(^96\) These stores were known as *tiendas de raya* because instead of imprinting their signature, illiterate workers drew a line in front of their names.
Revolution, and to a considerable extent, the hatred these commercial establishments caused among workers made them a common target during the years of the armed conflict.

In any case, the end of the Porfirian years was met with an unprecedented economic crisis announcing its political decline. A significant rise in the prices of basic products such as beef, milk, rice came along with rampant inflation. Therefore, when the first Revolutionary leaders such as Francisco Villa and Francisco Madero took office in 1910 in Chihuahua and Mexico City respectively, they took initiatives to restore the cost of these basic goods.97

While a problem of food shortage ensued as a result of the armed conflict causing some fluctuations in the price of basic products during the first few years of the 1910s; specialists have characterized this period as one of relative price stability. By contrast, the period where economy was most disrupted lasted from 1914 to 1916, which coincides with the most violent years of the Revolution. This can be attributed to a variety of factors, among which stand the decrease in production during the Revolution, the disruption of the railways and financial systems and a period of bad weather that damaged agriculture in that period.

It was during these years when a severe inflationary crisis and a kind of monetary anarchy took place. During these years, two currencies circulated in the country. The first was called the “unfalsifiable” (infalsificable) peso, and was issued by the government of Carranza as paper money to prevent forgery by rebels. As this money was printed in the form of bills, it ran the risk of circulating without necessarily having enough financial sustentation. Therefore, the alternative currency, the “gold pesos”, was calculated against the international price of gold thus making it more stable. The volatility of the Revolutionary years and at the end of the decade of the 1910s was further

97 Enrique Ochoa has written a most interesting study on how public policies of food supply in Mexico have responded to political agendas at different times during the twentieth century. Enrique Ochoa. Feeding Mexico : the political uses of food since 1910. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2000).
exacerbated in Mexico by the world economic crisis and by the increase in the external demand caused by World War I.

The table below offers a comparison of prices before and after the Revolution, with a calculation of the ensuing percent change.

**Figure 1.6.** Average retail prices of basic goods in Mexico City between 1910 and 1918 (pesos per kilogram)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1918</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Corn</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White bread</td>
<td>0.32</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beans</td>
<td>0.12</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td>183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lard</td>
<td>0.60</td>
<td>2.04</td>
<td>333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coffee (milled)</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milk (liter)</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salt</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sugar</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.63</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charcoal</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Firewood</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rent (pesos per month)</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>7.50</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wax candles</td>
<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.90</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soap</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.79</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloth (pesos per meter)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.80</td>
<td>471</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

157.6% (Average)

It is notable that some of the products that most increased in price were those associated with an “urbanized” diet and life style, such as wheat bread, soap and sugar. The differential in rates of increase was probably also due to the subsidies that post-Revolutionary governments granted to the most important staple products (corn, milk, etc.) as well as a gradual transformation in the consumer habits of Capitalino people.

This data permits us to infer that in 1910, for the price equivalent to two tickets at the carpas’ best seats, one could buy a kilogram of rice, another of beans, another of corn, and half a liter of milk; enough for a modest meal for a medium sized family of, say, 5-6 people. Not perhaps so “cheap” after all. By 1918 for 50 cents, the cost of living had increased and for the

---

98 Sources: AGN-DT, box 116, file 6; box 144, file 2; box 368, file 3. Taken from Enrique Ochoa, *Feeding Mexico*, 30.
same price one could buy only half the amount of the same products. At this time, – two years before Amor’s reporting of the “extremely low prices of the carpas”- the price of the carpas had not increased, which makes them seem cheaper than before.

The general rate of inflation in the period under study is significant. Even if our first impression is that the carpas’ price did not change much, only the cheaper prices at the carpas remained constant, while those that were more expensive increased at a scandalous rate of 150%. And even a “constant” price was becoming harder and harder to pay during these years. As Fig 1.6 shows, the average price increase of basic products grew by 157% between years 1910 and 1918; but contrastingly, the average wage only increased by 3%, so that purchasing power was considerably reduced. In effect, from the perspective of a capitalino worker, the price for attending a carpa shows grew considerably in less than a decade.

Despite its many upheavals, historians have perceived the decade of the twenties as one of greater economic stability than the preceding decade. An evidence of this is that Mexico’s new Constitution, written in 1917, established an official minimum wage. The increased worker’s rights obtained after the Revolution, such as unionization and the right to strike, allowed workers to demand wage increases in order to cope with the ongoing price increases. Fig 1.7 offers an estimate of the changes in the minimum wage between 1890 and 1930.

**Figure 1.7. Minimum wages in the central region of Mexico**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Wage (pesos per day)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>0.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>No data available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interdependent processes of inflation, nominal and real wages, labor movements and the local and international markets caused a considerable reduction in the purchasing power of the Mexican workers.

---

99 Source: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI) for those years comprised between 1890 and 1910.
during this period. Analyzing them far exceeds my interpretive abilities. I therefore have recourse to
economic historian Aurora Gómez Galvarriato, who has produced a meticulous study explaining all these
interactions.\textsuperscript{100} Two of the charts produced by Gómez Galvarriato indicate the increase in prices as opposed
to the increase in both nominal wages and real wages for a variety of productive sectors during two periods:
first, the term comprised between 1900-1913, (a period of relative economic stability); and secondly, the
period between 1917-1920, considered more severe in terms of economic crisis. Noticeably, the period 1914-
1916 is left out of records, most plausibly due to the political and monetary anarchy I described above. The
bottom row offers an interpretation of the percentage increase of prices as opposed to wages, thus allowing
inferences about the changes in the purchasing power of Mexican workers.

\textbf{Figure. 1.8.a and 1.8.b} Comparison of Prices and Real Wages in Mexico between 1900-1920.\textsuperscript{101}

\textbf{Table 1}

Prices and real wages 1900-1913

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Prices avg Index</th>
<th>Nominal Weekly</th>
<th>Wages Hourly (72 hours work-week)</th>
<th>Real Weekly</th>
<th>Wages Hourly (72 hours work-week)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>$4.89</td>
<td>$4.89</td>
<td>$4.89</td>
<td>$4.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>104.72</td>
<td>$5.62</td>
<td>$5.62</td>
<td>$5.37</td>
<td>$5.37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>114.89</td>
<td>$5.95</td>
<td>$5.95</td>
<td>$5.18</td>
<td>$5.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>115.30</td>
<td>$5.76</td>
<td>$5.76</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
<td>$5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>116.57</td>
<td>$6.31</td>
<td>$6.31</td>
<td>$5.41</td>
<td>$5.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>117.94</td>
<td>$6.04</td>
<td>$6.04</td>
<td>$5.12</td>
<td>$5.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>117.79</td>
<td>$6.19</td>
<td>$6.19</td>
<td>$5.26</td>
<td>$5.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>122.35</td>
<td>$6.74</td>
<td>$6.74</td>
<td>$5.51</td>
<td>$5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>123.97</td>
<td>$6.62</td>
<td>$6.62</td>
<td>$5.34</td>
<td>$5.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>132.25</td>
<td>$6.91</td>
<td>$6.91</td>
<td>$5.23</td>
<td>$5.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>146.50</td>
<td>$6.90</td>
<td>$6.90</td>
<td>$4.71</td>
<td>$4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>146.07</td>
<td>$6.60</td>
<td>$6.60</td>
<td>$4.52</td>
<td>$4.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>148.73</td>
<td>$7.72</td>
<td>$7.72</td>
<td>$5.19</td>
<td>$6.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>150.76</td>
<td>$8.11</td>
<td>$9.73</td>
<td>$5.38</td>
<td>$6.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-1907</td>
<td></td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>37.7%</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907-1911</td>
<td></td>
<td>19.4%</td>
<td>-2.0%</td>
<td>-2.0%</td>
<td>-17.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-1913</td>
<td></td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{100} Aurora Gómez Galvarriato. \textit{The evolution of Prices and Real Wages from the Porfiriato to the Revolution}, Vol 90 of CIDE Documento de Trabajo: División de Economía, 1997.

\textsuperscript{101} Idem, 6, 17.
Comparison of the two tables also allows us to notice that the work-week was reduced by law from 72 hours in the first period, to 48 in the second. After her analysis, Gomez Galvarriato offers a general conclusion to help us understand the economic changes that affected the purchasing power and labor conditions of Mexican workers after the Revolution.

By 1913 workers had won most of what the Revolution would give them, and the fall of Madero and the spread and intensification of war had a very high cost for workers in terms of living standards. Those were times of penury and hunger. The labor movement grew stronger and by 1917 workers were able to recover the purchasing power they had by 1913, working less and with higher non-wage benefits. Yet, despite the vigorous union, workers were not able to retain this level of real wages through the period 1917-20. [As a general conclusion, it can be stated that] it was leisure rather than income what workers obtained from the Revolution relative to their earnings, before their real wages started collapsing in the last two years of the Porfiriato.102

Gómez Galvarriato’s interpretation sheds light on the generalized conditions of economic hardship during and after the Revolution. These years of “penury and hunger” partially explain why the carpas shows were real competitors to established theaters of the City: they cost far less to attend.

Why then, after the Revolution and with the purchasing power of workers considerably decimated, did those workers still attend the carpas? One possibility is that, as Gómez Galvarriato concludes, after the Revolution the working conditions in some important sectors improved. One of these improvements was that, after 1912, the work day was reduced from twelve to ten hours, and

---

102 Idem, 19.
then again from ten to nine in 1915, with which workers gained leisure time as opposed to greater wages. This would possibly constitute a reason behind the growing success of the carpas. Another possibility is that the carpas companies and their managers adapted remarkably well to the changing socio-economic context. Not only did they safeguard their businesses by updating their repertoire according to the trends in musical taste, but they also catered to a diverse audience in terms of both prices and musical taste. Their two-seat policy helped to preserve and even increase their audiences, even in times when the purchasing power waned.

While the carpas audience increased in numbers over the years 1900-1920, they also changed in socio-economic composition. If especially in their earlier years (1890-1910s), the carpas were not extremely cheap – which may account for why some people remained outside, peeping through the holes in the wood walls – they were nevertheless economic enough to attract numerous people. By the decade of the twenties, formal theaters were charging between fifty cents and one peso for a show, a price that was more expensive to the purchasing power than it had been before. This raise rendered the carpas attractive to people who could no longer pay such prices. As a result, people who formerly conformed the revista theaters’ audiences became the public of the carpas shows.

Towards the 1920s the carpas revenues were decimated by taxations and fines, which partially explains how and why the carpas were gradually impoverished. While at the end of the nineteenth century the carpas were viable businesses able to compete with established theaters, by the years 1920s they were seen by their own participants, journalists and city chroniclers alike, as impoverished remnants struggling to survive financially. And yet, the nostalgic tinges with which local writers varnished their accounts of the carpas did not undermine by any means the artistic

---

103 I have culled prices of musical shows in formal theaters from pamphlets and hand programs hosted in the “Carpas collection” at CITRU.
vitality and sense of vibrancy that people who frequented them felt when listening to the new musics performed there.

Not surprisingly, the newly founded industries of film and radio found in the carpas shows the nurseries that were to feed their flanks of stars. From the 1930s to the 1950s the economic system by which the carpas had operated changed substantially: they regained economic stability and the shows moved to formal theaters. The advancement of the nationalistic post-Revolutionary project served to inject money to the industries that were to serve as the state’s ideological apparatuses. All these factors account for the beginning of a new era for the carpas shows, and support my thesis of a second period of development.

**Changing Conceptions of Class**

The profound socio-economic reorganization of the first quarter of the twentieth century in Mexico catalyzed by the demise of Porfirio Díaz in 1911, dramatically affected how the privileged sectors began to conceive of themselves. So much so, that often the press in Mexico City devoted full-page editorial articles to commentaries about the recent economic changes and about the shifting social positions of certain groups. In May 9th, 1920, for instance, the editorial article of Revista de Revistas published a bitter complaint about rising prices. Years later, after the Wall Street stock market crash of 1929, which also affected Mexico, journalist Teodoro Torres published an article titled “Who are the poor people now.” In this article, he refers to data offered by Paul Maze, whom he refers to be the “chairman of pawnshops” in Paris. By contrasting the objects that people brought

---

104 “Espectulación y los precios” in Revista de Revistas, (May 9, 1920).

105 Torres designation prevents us from knowing whether he was referring to a government title or simple to a pawnshop owner. Historical knowledge however, suggests that the person he was referring to was the French painter Paul Lucien Maze (1887-1979). Son of a tea merchant and an art collector, it is possible that Maze was involved in art brokering during the 1920s and that he probably wrote the article Torres read. I have been unable to find out whether or not this is the Paul Maze actually in charge of pawnshops in Paris.
in to pawn before and after the Wall Street crisis, Maze assessed the dramatic shifts in the profile of people who used these financial centers of last resort. Torres attempts a comparison between Paris and Mexico:

What the director of the pawnshop in Paris says can be applied to Mexico, with only slight modifications, because ours is a country with more social classes than any other. The real proletarian class, that in the countryside, the Indian who lives at the margins of civilization, has not experienced any improvement, and is poor in such a way that he cannot be considered as part of the class that comes to pawn-shops, first because there are no such businesses where he lives, and secondly, because he would not have anything to pawn anyways. But eliminating this class, and considering the next class in the social ranks, the working class living in the cities, it can be said that it is in better conditions, often times much better than its counterpart in Europe. The pay per working day here has increased in a greater proportion than anywhere else. Considering the average of what workers, public officers in the public and private sectors, small salesmen, and in sum, all those called the middle class earn and what they spend, one sees that those urban workers are in better conditions than the bourgeoisie and the bureaucrats.106

While questionable in terms of its economic accuracy, this quote offers a magnificent example of a commonly-held imaginary around the poor and proletarian classes supposed to live in and outside of Mexico city at this time. Torres’ merged preconception of indigenous people and peasants is representative of the perspective of middle class and educated capitalinos in the early twentieth century. Imagined to live only in the countryside and “at the margins of civilization”, the Indian/peasant is quickly discarded as a participant in both urban and economic life. Contrastingly, the optimism with which Torres conceives of the urban worker is reflective of post-Revolutionary official discourses that pretended to have a greater social consciousness.

Torres continues his assessment by lamenting the appearance of the newly rich,

106 Teodoro Torres, “Quiénes son ahora los pobres” in Revista de Revistas, (April 27, 1930): 5. “Lo que dice el director del Monte de Piedad de París se puede aplicar a México, con ligeras modificaciones, porque el nuestro es un país con más clases que cualquiera otro. La clase realmente proletaria, la del campo, el indio que vive al margen de la civilización, no ha experimentado ninguna mejoría y es de tal manera pobre, que ni siquiera puede ser tomado en cuenta como clase concurrente a los Montes de Piedad, primero porque no los hay donde él vive, y después porque no tendría que empeñar. Pero eliminando a esa clase y partiendo de la que le sigue en el escalafón social, de la obrera que vive en las ciudades, puede decirse que se haya en mejores condiciones, muchas veces mejores que su congénera la de Europa. Los jornales han subido aquí en una proporción mayor que en cualquiera otra parte. Tomando el promedio de lo que ganan y de lo que gastan obreros y empleados públicos y particulares, pequeños negociantes, y, en fin, toda esa clase llamada media, se ve que aquellos los obreros, están en mejores condiciones que esta gente burguesa y burocrática.”
Those [bringing their goods to] pawnshops, because they no longer have resources are the rich, which is to say, those who were rich before the social order changed [...] Those [formerly] rich are now poor, together with many newly rich who do not know how to be rich, and spend what they earn in a few months anyway [...] The tiple can also be observed, who sold her favors to this or that important personage in exchange for luxurious cars and tempting diamonds [...] All of them are the poor rich, the really poor of nowadays, and the regular costumers of the pawnshop, which has become a storehouse of sumptuous and tasteful things.

Mention of a newly rich tiple is not casual. It was well known that highly ranked politicians and public administrators were frequent visitors to Revista theaters during and shortly after the Revolution, and that many of them sustained affairs with the divas of Revista shows, often pleasing them with splendid presents. And while the idea that the formal theaters were sites of lavish extravagance was only partially true, it made all the more contrast with the modesty of the carpas theaters.

**Work at the Carpas**

Life inside the most humble of the carpas was indeed full of material hardship and common effort to make ends meet. But while working at the carpas may not have provided a big income, the daily earnings allowed people involved to solve immediate needs.

By 1921 inspector Hipólito Amor handed a report to the Ayuntamiento Office in which he estimated that the income of a single carpa could support up to twenty-five people and their

---

107 “Los que empeñan porque no les queda otro recursos son los ricos, es decir, los que fueron ricos antes de que cambiara el orden de cosas social [...] Esos ricos son ahora los pobres, juntamente con muchos nuevos ricos que no saben serlo, y en unos cuantos meses gastan lo ganado de cualquier modo [...] Se puede también estar al acecho de la tiple que vendió sus favores al personajazo tal o cual, por coches lujosos y diamantes tentadores [...] Todos eso son los ricos pobres, los verdaderos pobres de ahora, clientela segura del Montepío que es ya un almacén de cosas suntuarias y de buen gusto.” Ibid.

families. Due to lack of written evidence, it is extremely difficult to calculate how the distribution of nightly earnings occurred. However, the existing testimonies allow me to infer that in this system members of the company would have received earnings that were proportional to the time they invested and the numbers of acts in which they performed.

After 1930, that is, during the second stage of the carpas, when performances took place in formal and new theaters, some actors reported that carpa managers paid hourly rates to their employees. Roberto Montúfar Sánchez, a carpas actor who worked in the decade of the 1930s, remembered:

Each tanda lasted very little time, because streams of people would come. Earnings were meager for managers. We had our hourly rate: we were paid as many hours as we worked. Everyone wanted December 12th [Virgin Mary’s saint day] to come, to balance things out financially.

The general perception among those not directly involved in the world of the theater was that work at the carpas was done with little effort. The quote below, from an assiduous visitor to carpas Fregoli and Cardenti in the late 1920s and early 1930s offers some insight into general audience views of what it was like to work in one of these theaters. Additionally it offers an interpretation of the type of material gains that were achieved by some people, and how gender conditioned some of these gains.

Many [people] became dancers and comedians because it was a way to work without really working. People who were too lazy to work as manicurist or hairdresser, or as operators for the tram system, resolved their little problem singing and playing, because with the entrance fee at twenty-five cents there was not enough money to pay so many people, but only barely enough to ensure they ate. The ladies didn’t care that much, because there was always someone willing to take them out for dinner, or who would take them home in a cab, but men did not have such an incentive. There was a lack of


110 According to the testimony of Roberto Chávez, between 1925-1935 the carpas would stay approximately two months in each location. Merlin, Vida y milagros, 107.

111 “Las tandas duraban poco, porque entraban ríos de gente. Las ganancias eran pigüés para los empresarios. Nosotros teníamos nuestro sueldito por horas, tantas como trabajábamos se nos pagaba. Todo el mundo quería que llegara a el 12 de diciembre, para nivelarse económicamente.” [December twelve is Lady Guadalupe’s Day, a day when pilgrims flock in thousands to the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Not only the traditional pilgrimage means more people in the city, but also the date sets the opening of the Christmas Holidays and thus a good time for the carpas shows.] Roberto Montúfar Sánchez in Merlin, Vida y milagros, 95.
work but what there was most in Mexico, and still is in spite of [the passage of] so many years, is a lack of willingness to work. If there are two things to do, they always choose the easiest one.\textsuperscript{112}

Rafael Solana’s view that “people were lazy” and “did not want to work on anything else” represents a typical dismissive view of the carpas actor as a worker. While Solana was a member of the audience well acquainted with the carpas culture, he spoke from the perspective of an outsider, in the sense that he was never an actor or musician in these shows. His view expresses and perpetuates an ancient prejudice according to which actors were not considered real workers. Similarly, since work in the streets was not commonly perceived as a legitimate source of income by authorities, the general appreciation was that carpa actors were something only slightly better than common vagrants.

An additional source of vulnerability for carpa workers was that the jacalones were constantly exposed to climatic events. A close-up look to the picture of the Salón Variedades (Fig. 1.3 above) not only shows that the state of this carpa was doubtlessly far from opulent, but also shows damp wood at the top and bottom of the jacalón and of the ticket office. This points to the aftermaths of recent rain. The still-wet tent, the mark of water very high on the ticket office wall, and the big puddle on the muddy cobblestone street, all reinforce the suspicion not only of heavy rain but of flood as well.

The rain season was terrible for us because, as I said, everything was canvas and we needed to make sure the public did not get wet wet. By any means we had to cover the holes of the canvas and we had to make earthen dikes with shovels or with our own hands, so that water did not come through to the \textit{luneta} which, as I said, was on the ground [not paved]. After this, we had to get our clothing dry, and the morning after we would dismantle the most affected part so that the \textit{relinguero}- that is

\textsuperscript{112} “Surgieron tantas bailarinas y tanto cómicos porque era una manera de trabajar sin trabajar. Gente a la que le daba flojera meterse de manicurista o de peluquero o de obrero o de motorista en los tranvías, cantando y tocando resolvían su problemita, porque con la entrada a 25 centavos no había para pagarle a tantos, sino para que apenas comieran, a las muchachas no les importaba mucho porque siempre había quien invitara a cenar o las llevara a su casa en taxi, pero los hombres no tenían ese incentivo. Había escasez de empleo pero lo que más había en México y lo sigue habiendo, a pesar de tantos años, es la escasez de ganas de trabajar. Si hay dos cosas que hacer, escogen una más fácil.” Rafael Solana, in Merlin, \textit{Vida y milagros}, 157.
what the person in charge of sewing the canvas was called- could repair them. The name of that person is Benigno Ortega, and we are still friends today.113

Salvador Gómez’ mention of the existence of “relingueros” is telling; it suggests the many specialized jobs that emerged around the carpas culture. Carpas that settled in the same neighborhood for a relatively long period of time promoted a wide range of ancillary economic activities, occupations which not only provided a source of income to members of the troupe, but also to neighbors. These jobs included seamstresses, cooks, stage designers, shoemakers, hairdressers, illumination crew, cleaners, ticket sellers and prompters, music copyists, musical instrument repairmen, electricians, carpenters, and many more.

Sociologist Mark Granovetter has explored the ways in which the availability of jobs depends on and can reinforce social relationships. As he explains, social relationships with friends and people whom one considers close associates, make up “tightly-knit social networks”. These networks facilitate communication of available jobs in a system, through a simple logic: the closer the social relationship, the more and more rapidly communication of needed labor will flow. News of the existence of available jobs will first be distributed among closer friends (“tight knits”) and then in turn to acquaintances of participants in the system, those who make up the “weak knits”. If new individuals get incorporated to the system, then the social network is increased or renovated.114

The economic activities around the carpas facilitated social exchange as much as they promoted physical mobility. As workers would convene in different streets or plazas near the

---

113 “Los tiempos de lluvias eran terribles para nosotros, porque como dije, todo era de lona y nosotros teníamos la necesidad de cuidar que no se mojara el público. Como fuera, había que tapar todos los agujeros que se hacían en la lona y había que levantar, con palas o con las manos, bordes de tierra, para que no se metiera el agua a la luneta que como dije, era de tierra. Después de esto nos preocupábamos por secarnos la ropa y al otro día teníamos que desmontar la parte más afectada, para que el relinguero, que así se llamaba la persona encargada de coser las lonas, las pudiera reparar. El nombre de esa persona es Benigno Ortega, con quien hasta la fecha guardamos amistad.” Salvador Gómez Estrella in Merlín, Vida y milagros, 115.

theaters to exchange goods such as prompts, costumes, or shoes, the use of the urban space among
the people involved in the production team of the carpas fostered a greater connection to the
physicality of the city. Similarly, people participating in the carpas shows visited one another at
their homes, for activities such as studying plots, or for obtaining services like home-made meals,
repair of musical instruments, tailoring and many more. Thus they increased social familiarity, while
also growing better acquainted with the changing urban space. Often, members of the carpa
community visited one another in their different carpas, thus promoting interaction between
different companies while also reinforcing the sense of camaraderie. Since the degree of
specialization of carpa-related activities increased interdependence among members of this
community, social relationships were also reinforced. Friendly competition for the favors of the
audiences, and the sharing of secrets among the carpa workers’ community, raised the standards of
execution in the various fields of specialization at the carpas. All of this argues against the idea that
actors and musicians working in these shows “took the easy way.”

Due to the gregarious organization of the carpas, as much as to the many needs of the
shows, child labor at the carpas was very common. Occasionally, carpa managers requested special
permits for children to work in the shows, especially when the plot of a given zarzuela required it. And while employing young children was another very old theatrical custom, documented from as
early as the 1400s, Mexican laws in the early 20th century claimed to proscribe children employment,
even in occupations where it was traditional. Such laws were probably meant to counter the
exploitation of children that had been so common during the Porfirian years. Nevertheless, if in
general terms the official order was to keep children away from the carpa companies, oral histories

---

115 For an ethnographic study of how a music scene can simultaneously reinforce social networks and activate the
economy of a city, assisting in the construction of community and locality see Sarah Cohen, *Decline, Renewal and the City in

116 Examples of this are offered in “Licencias expedidas a los espectáculos para que trabajen niños menores de
suggest that they were more commonly present than is documented in permits and inspector’s reports.

The testimonies of some carpa actors reveal closeness between councilors or inspectors, and children or adolescents who worked at the carpas. For instance, actor and dancer Roberto Chávez remembers that in the 1930s, when he was fourteen, “he liked the inspector very much.” He also recalled having bought cigarettes and coffee for him – until the day when the inspector realized Chávez worked as a prompter in a show “full of naked women.” The inspector, by name Cabrera, but fondly remembered by Chávez as “Cabrerita,” enforced Chávez’ firing, and warned the company’s manager that he would close the carpa if he saw the minor around the theater again.¹¹⁷

**Benefit Shows**

Community labor at the carpas made material hardship more bearable. Perhaps nothing reinforced the sense of community more around the carpas that the *funciones de beneficio*. The *beneficios*, or benefit shows, were special one-night shows whose profits would be bestowed to one member of the company. These collaborative shows illustrate how social relationships among participants in carpa culture were often inspired by feelings of solidarity, reciprocity and mutuality. Upon invitation from either the carpa manager or from the “beneficiary” him/her self, singers, actors, comedians or musicians contributed their talent in order to diversify the offerings of that night, thus helping to increase revenues. Offered regularly, these special nights enhanced interactions between audiences and artists, as well as among members of the carpa companies who, out of sympathy, or perhaps expecting their turn to be the beneficiary of a show, donated their earnings for one night.¹¹⁸ Pedro

---

¹¹⁷ Roberto Chávez in Merlín, *Vida y milagros*, 105-108.

¹¹⁸ A voluminous file with details on benefit shows can be consulted in AHDF, SDP- “Beneficios” Vol. 810, File 1562.
Granados, a former audience member from the 1920s to the 1950s recalls such sociability, emphasizing the sense of community actors must have felt:

Brotherhood under the tent, the heritage from the circus is immeasurable. The ‘benefit’ [shows] were irrefutable proof of companionship, love and even of commercial interest. The artists who intended to celebrate his or her ‘benefit’, knew for certain that he [or she] would have the broad and disinterested collaboration [of the rest].\(^{119}\)

Meanwhile, Roberto Rodriguez “Churro,” a former carpa artist, remembers:

We suffered at the carpas, but they were also very rewarding. The people invited us to their houses […] At the carpa we also struggled to get people in (it is not like one is a gold coin), we put on beneficios for all the actors and then, at last, for the big star.\(^{120}\)

As Churro’s entire testimony suggests, among the people who donated their varied skills, there were some, most likely habitual audience members, who contributed material goods to raffle or sell, or simply to donate for the use of the beneficiary and his/her family.

One time there was a benefit show for actors, the empresa [company manager] donated a given amount, very small, certainly, and sometimes they did not give anything, we have to put it from our pocket, but people, grateful, brought us flowers, a small present, a perfume, anything… that day was the benefit of my wife, and she was given two boxes. One beer box, […] and a box full of bottles of wine.” \(^{121}\)

It thus appears clear that benefit shows worked based on a system of solidarity and trust between the beneficiary, and friends or acquaintances willing to help the cause.

Since benefit shows depended on the skills of actors, musicians and volunteers, additions, modifications and omissions to the program were very common. It is possible that the variety programs for benefit shows ended being not only diverse but also quite random. Furthermore, the

\(^{119}\) “La hermandad bajo el toldo, herencia del circo, es inconmensurable. Los ‘beneficios,’ prueba irrefutable de compañerismo, de amor y hasta de sentido comercial. El artista que tenía la intención de celebrar su ‘beneficio’ sabía de antemano que tendría la colaboración amplia y desinteresada.” Granados, *Carpas de México*, 61.

\(^{120}\) “En las carpas sufrimos, pero tuvimos muchas satisfacciones. La gente nos invitaba a sus casas […] En la carpa también tuvimos que luchar para meter a la gente, uno no es monedita de oro, hacíamos beneficios a todos los actores y al último la gran figura.” Roberto Rodriguez “Churro,” in Merlin, *Vida y milagros*, 103.

\(^{121}\) “En una ocasión se hacía un beneficio a los actores, la empresa donaba una cierta cantidad, por cierto, bastante corta, y a veces no nos daban nada, teníamos que poner de nuestra bolsa, pero la gente agradecida, nos llevaba flores, algún regalo, un perfume, un equis. Esa vez era a beneficio de mi esposa, y le llevaron dos cajas. Una caja de cerveza, […] y una caja llena de botellas de vino.” Montúfar in Merlin, *Vida y milagros*, 95.
larger number of participants in the benefit shows ranging between fifteen to twenty-something artists, as compared to the habitual cast of less than ten people for an ordinary night’s show, also increased the risk of the program deviating in performance from its printed form.

The presence of unforeseen modifications to the program was something that inspectors monitored with special zeal, presumably because they wanted to avoid last-minute insertions that defied official ideas of morality. As inspectors themselves argued, such unexpected changes apparently caused the annoyance of expectant audiences (whom I suspect, in the cases of the benefit shows, were not habitual carpa-goers). Therefore, the inspectors’ intervention on the matter was meant to avoid the disappointment of paying customers. Whether this was a real reason, or merely one more excuse to fine the theaters, it is clear that the Office of Public Entertainment did not accept or understand the logic of spontaneous artistic collaboration underlying the benefit shows.

Either because officers distrusted the word of honor of artists, or because they wanted to avoid frustrated audiences, in 1921 they began to request that participants in benefits shows sign a “contract” that committed them to participate in the special event. In case of not complying with the announced program, the manager or owner of the carpa would get a fine for not having complied with the Regulation of Public Entertainment. Nevertheless, changes in the program continued to happen due to the very collaborative nature of these special shows; the managers paid

122 It is possible that the case of a Benefit show held in 1922 by the Virginia Fábregas company set a negative precedent in the eyes of the Ayuntamiento. In January 1922 two artists could not participate because they had fallen ill. Other artists covered their acts, but the audience, not happy about the changes, loudly complained because, as officers explained, people felt they had been swindled (estafados). After that event, the Ayuntamiento Office became stricter in enforcing that the companies complied with the artist and programs that had been announced. AHDF- SDP Vol. 810, File, 1562.

123 All these contracts are collected in a filed under the name “Comprobantes de artistas por los cuales quedan comprometidos para trabajar en funciones de beneficios en los teatros y carpas, así como en los salones cinematográficos en que hay variedades” in AHDF- SDP Vol. 810 File, 1562.

124 The amendment to the Official Regulation of Public Entertainment stipulated strict compliance with the variety program previously announced and authorized. See AHDF- SDP, Vol. 3924.
the ensuing fines. As a result, the “solution” only ended up enriching the Ayuntamiento on behalf of discontented audiences.

The many artists’ signatures listed in such agreements is perhaps the only remaining evidence of the names of those otherwise anonymous artists that made the early carpa shows possible. (For transcribed samples of these contracts See Appendix 2). Singers, comedians, puppeteers, ventriloquists, magicians, were all happy to participate to the benefit of their “compañeros” (colleagues). A follow-up to the registers of the benefits shows of year 1922 reveals that many of the participants became beneficiaries themselves during that same year. Among these names, that of the famous Revista comedian Amelia Wilhelmy, who enlisted in the benefit of Sr. Mario Barreira Rakamá, suggests that some artists transited between the circuits of Revistas musicales in formal theaters, and the carpa shows. Association of one circuit with the other may have also resulted in a greater prestige for carpa actors and singers, especially because, within the political economy of the carpas, the label “artist” provided carpa actors and singers with a means to obtain social acceptance, and in many cases sincere appreciation, regardless of how disreputable their life styles or stigmatized their social position could have been. As actor Roberto Rodriguez “Churro” recalled:

I started to gain some fame in Sonora and Sinaloa, I had nice roles […] the audience was all mine and then I started drinking; I was a good boy, but the pressure … I was not a bad actor, even today they call me master, I liked helping my peers […] At the carpa we suffered, but they were also very rewarding […] when my kids were little, they [care-givers] took off their cradle blankets and put them facing the audience. Their grandma said it was so that they would hear the applause from early on, and get to like it.126

125 While Socorro Merlín provided an exhaustive list of carpa artists active between 1930-1950, I have not been able to find information on the carpas artists before 1930 besides that available in legal records kept at the Ayuntamiento archive.

126 “Empecé a hacer famita en Sonora y Sinaloa, a hacer papeles bonitos […] el público se me entregaba y empecé a agarrar el alcohol, era muchacho bueno, pero la insistencia … No era malo como actor, hasta la fecha me dicen maestro, me gusta ayudar a los compañeros. En las carpas sufrimos, pero tuvimos muchas satisfacciones. La gente nos invitaba a sus casas […] A mis hijos cuando eran chiquitos, les quitaban el cobertor y los ponían de cara al público. Su abuela decía que era para que oyeran los aplausos desde chiquitos y se aficionaran a ellos.” Roberto Rodríguez “El Churro”, in Merlín, Vida y milagros, 101.
As the above testimony indicates, the audience’s applause often served as a measure of social acknowledgment and artistic merit; and, as happens in many other performing arts, actors often equate this gesture with artistic achievement and hence with success.

The most demanding audiences are in the periphery [of the city]; when an artist triumphs in the periphery he can act anywhere. The audience, even if unrefined, is very genteel, but if they dislike the artist they kick him out. When the audience is convinced and applauds, triumph is achieved.\(^{127}\)

As the documented interactions with authorities suggest, the traditional collaborative social organization within which these companies worked seems to have conflicted with the nascent capitalist system and with the government’s plans to transform people’s financial attitudes and practices.\(^{128}\) Because the operating logics of the carpas were based on collaborative work and reciprocity, they represented a system that contradicted the capitalist principles of individualism. In this sense too, they were seen as a threat to the modernizing project. Yet fiscal control upon these theaters is indicative of the double standards held by the authorities.

The carpas shows fostered an environment of camaraderie, conviviality, friendship and social support dearly treasured among its participants. Night after night, the carpas shows cultivated a supportive network among artists, audience members and, in some cases, even censorship inspectors, through musical and social interactions. As oral histories suggest, this conviviality extended outside of the carpa and into bars, restaurants and other places in the city:

At the carpas they [audience members] were happy, they applauded or berated the artists according to their acting. People addressed the artists familiarly [los tuteaban], they pampered them but the people were also very demanding on the artists. Therefore social gatherings after the shows were very frequent. Many times it was the typical fifteen-cents coffee between one revista and the other.\(^{129}\)

\(^{127}\) “El público más difícil es el de la periferia; cuando un artista triunfa en la periferia, ya puede actuar en cualquier parte. El público, a pesar de ser ‘raspa’ es muy noble, pero si no le gusta el artista lo sacan. Cuando se convence el público y aplaude se llega al triunfo.” Guadalupe Márquez “Caralimpia” in Merlín, Vida y milagros, 100.

\(^{128}\) To this respect see Leonor Ludlow, “El paso a la instituciones de crédito en la ciudad de México, 1850-1890,” in Modernidad, tradición y alteridad, 17-23.

\(^{129}\) “Ahí eran felices, aplaudían o chiflaban a los artistas, según sus actuaciones. Los tuteaban, los consentían y les exigían, pero todo esto con cariño, porque el pueblo sentía que eran ‘sus’ artistas, por lo que eran muy frecuentes las tertulias
The enhanced sociability in the neighborhood and physical mobility within it may have led to the creation of “mind maps” of the city, or as political geographer and urban planner Edward Soja has called it, a “third space”, which is simultaneously an experienced and an imagined space. By inhabiting, using and building social relationships within these localized spaces, the carpas community, made up of both carpa workers and members of the audience, anchored their social, musical and affective experiences in the neighborhoods where the carpas settled. Such experience made them imagine and live the city and their particular position within it. As sources demonstrate, the most common term people used in these years to refer to the geographical space they inhabited was “barrio,” a term that was also frequently identified as the niche of the carpas. (I discuss the significance of the barrio for the development of the carpas in chapters two and five).

By now, it should be clear that the turn to the twentieth century and its first quarter was a tumultuous time for Mexico as a country, in all political, social, ideological and economic realms. Views and public policies that had affected Indians and peasants in the late Porfiriato were profoundly challenged by the radical measures taken by Revolutionaries. Yet, the long lasting effects of colonized subjectivity among authorities and average capitalino subjects did not vanish with the Revolution. As continued prejudice against the carpas companies and their audiences illustrates, the “civilizing” project in which successive Mexican governments were invested reinforced a hierarchical system of classifying people according to their cultural practices. The carpas functioned as a species of containment houses for those who were seen by the city authorities as barely above the line of civilization, and in some cases even below it. What is more, these variety theaters apparently

---

preoccupied authorities on the economic level as well, for their inner organization conflicted with the principles of capitalism recently introduced to Mexico.

However, such attitudes seem to have masked a genuine official interest in preserving the carpas, an interest that was far more pragmatic: taxation revenues. If in their earliest years the carpas were a popular entertainment option, they were also a thriving economic activity that could feed the many people that made up their companies. And while the abrupt political changes of the early twentieth century and the ensuing economic distress in Mexico may have propitiated an upsurge of carpas theaters, these factors, together with the local government’s rapacity, also gradually led to their impoverishment. How this destitution happened in terms of urban space is the matter of the next chapter.
Chapter Two

The Space of the Poor and the Geography of Urban Entertainment

The rich and the humble, the gentleman and the poor citizen, abundance and power, or poverty and struggle for life are the characters and circumstances modeling—the former as constructors and the latter as elements—the physiognomy and personality of cities. The palace, the humble house, the products of greatness or misery: all of them shape the city. Residential areas and popular barrios, despite the distance separating them, sum up and are integrated in order to shape the population. There are no cities made uniquely of the rich, nor are there cities made only of the poor. One of the outcomes of urban planning is to make a central point where a complex society can dwell with all its contrasts.

Enrique Aragón Echeagaray, México Ciudad Multiforme. 131

In June 1900, Juan Bribiesca, chief secretary of the Ayuntamiento office, had to solve a problem: provisional jacalones and other leisure activities taking place in the streets of the city were blocking access for motorized vehicles, newly introduced to the central area of the city. He therefore prohibited the use of downtown streets for the purpose of entertainment. His proscription stated that, “to avoid the presence of obstacles in the streets of the city […] it is strictly forbidden to establish jacalones or merry-go-rounds (pabellones de caballitos), of any sort in the streets of the city.”132

One of the Ayuntamiento representatives in charge of enforcing this new disposition requested further clarification from Bribiesca, arguing that it was unclear (the term he actually used was “amphibological”) whether the measure referred to the streets, or if it only comprised plazuelas

131 Enrique Aragón Echeagaray, México Ciudad Multiforme, (México, D.F.: Publicaciones Atlántida, 1953), 91. “El rico y el humilde, el gran señor y el pobre ciudadano, la abundancia y el poder, o la pobreza y la lucha por la vida, son personajes y circunstancias que modelan, los primeros como constructores, y los segundos como elementos, la fisonomía y la personalidad de las ciudades. El palacio y la vivienda humilde, los productos de la grandeza o miseria, son los que dan forma a la urbe. Las zonas residenciales y los barrios populares, a pesar de la distancia que los separa, se suman e integran para dar forma a la población. No hay ciudades solo de ricos, ni ciudades únicamente de pobres. Uno de los resultados que ofrece la creación urbana, es el de hacer un centro en que habita la compleja sociedad, con sus múltiples contrastes.”

132 “Con el fin de que en lo sucesivo no se establezcan obstáculos en las calles de la ciudad (…) Queda prohibido terminantemente que en las calles de la ciudad se establezcan jacalones y pabellones de caballitos de cualquiera clase que sean.” «Prohibición para establecer jacalones y caballitos en las calles de la ciudad”. (Translations and italics are all mine unless otherwise stated). AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File 1057, (1900).
[squares], and if it was addressed only to merry-go-rounds, or to all types of jacalones and carpas [provisional theaters and canvas tents], regardless of the entertainment offered there.\textsuperscript{133}

The Ayuntamiento representative’s desire to distinguish between calles and plazuelas demonstrates his concern not for streets or squares themselves, but for the fate of the carpas or jacalones de zarzuela. His preoccupation was most likely connected to previous instances in which neighbors and owners of the jacalones had defended their right to use the streets for this sort of musical entertainment.\textsuperscript{134} Bribiesca dispelled the officer’s fears with an addendum explaining: “For squares, permissions remain as customary.” In addition, he stated the reasons why these shows should be preserved and guaranteed a space to perform:

In my humble opinion, I judge it not only necessary to provide all kinds of facilities for the establishment of public entertainment, but I also consider imperative the existence of these meeting centers amenable to all social classes; for many [people] they offer a moment of solace and rest from their daily work, providing something with which to amuse themselves, to entertain themselves, in some of these theaters, jacalones or canvas tents; and for others they represent the occasion to distract themselves, move away from [and] distract themselves from drunkenness, fights and even (serious) crime.\textsuperscript{135}

Along with the authorities of the city, Bribiesca believed that these shows had a sort of positive “civilizing effect,” especially on those they thought would otherwise get drunk or fight.\textsuperscript{136} This belief partially explains the official interest in preserving them, in spite of the potentially detrimental effect

\textsuperscript{133} “Antes de considerar la trascendencia que pueda tener el acuerdo cuyos términos son antifolológicos u obscuros, se sirva informar si la medida se refiere a las calles únicamente o se ha querido comprender en ella las plazuelas y si la limitación se pretende sólo para caballitos, o para toda clase de jacalones y tiendas de lona sea cual fuere la diversión que en ellos se establezca.” AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File 1057, (1900).

\textsuperscript{134} For a historical documentation of press account about how neighbors in downtown defended the existence of the variety jacalones during the nineteenth century, see Florencia Gutiérrez, El mundo del trabajo y el poder político: integración, consenso y resistencia en la ciudad de México a fines del siglo XIX. (México, D.F.: El Colegio de México, 2011), 237-249.

\textsuperscript{135} “En su humilde opinión juzga no solamente necesario el que se proporcione toda clase de facilidades para el establecimiento de diversiones públicas, sino que cree que se hace imperiosa la necesidad de existencia de estos centros de reunión adecuada a todas las clases sociales; pues para muchos es un momento de solaz y de descanso de su trabajo diario, el tener algo con que divertirse, con que entretenérase en alguno de estos teatros, de estos jacalones, o de esa tienda de lona, y para otros es el momento de apartarse de distraerse, bien de la embriaguez o de los riñas y hasta de los delitos (graves).” AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File 1057, (1900).

\textsuperscript{136} For legal characterizations of the jacalones and carpas shows explaining this prejudice see chapter one of this dissertation.
these theaters could have on the modern image desired for the city, and the possibility that these shows could bring together people of questionable standing. But while officers like Bribiesca often manifested their concern that people attending these shows could be potential criminals, the parenthetical inclusion of the adjective “serious” (to modify “crimes”) in the original document, suggests that they were not absolutely certain of their own assumptions.

The twentieth century was welcomed in Mexico with optimism and a spirit of renovation. The dreams that the Porfian elites had for Mexico were as much stimulated by the emancipatory impulses of the new independent nations, as by the regenerating ideas of the French fin-de-siècle. The year 1900, when Bribiesca issued his prohibition, also marked the beginning of the alteration of the city’s street plan in order to accommodate the automobile. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, requests to settle jacalones in public spaces had included places as emblematic as Plaza San Sebastián, Plaza de la Lagunilla, Plazuela Villamil and the Alameda Central; but at the turn of the century, traffic flow became a priority. Authorities denied requests, arguing that the jacalones were “detrimental to the traffic,” and in retaliation, some carpa managers expressed complaints about the “disadvantageous situation that works of construction caused for their theaters.” Despite attempts to negotiate with authorities to situate carpas in these plazas, the theaters were no longer authorized, and carpa managers moved their businesses to places further from the central area.

137 AHDF-SDP, Volumes 805 and 806. In fact, the use by common citizens of the Alameda Central and the Pasco de la Reforma made them common sites of dispute. For the celebration of the Centennial of Independence in the year 1910, the newspapers El Imparcial and El Tiempo proposed that the homeless and ragged children were not allowed in the streets since they will give a “bad impression to the visitors.” This same newspaper proposed a controverted measure to provide “proper trousers” to substitute the cotton pants worn by “barbaric” Indians. See, Sección editorial, “Pantalón y los huéspedes del Centenario” El Imparcial (June 8th, 1910) and “Notas Editoriales”. Rincones obscuros del cuadro,” El Tiempo (August 26, 1910).

138 AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File 1061 (1900); and Vol. 805, File 1069 (1900), respectively.

139 Similar cases of such disputes can be found in AHDF-SDP Vol. 810, File 1780.
In this chapter I analyze the many ways in which the development of the carpas scene is inherently linked to the spatial, economical, ideological, cultural and political transformations that Mexico City experienced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were years when the city’s governments were profoundly engaged with the turn-of-the-century project of modernization. As Mexico City underwent the transformations that this entailed, its physiognomy, geography and spatiality were deeply transformed too, and so were transformed the social interactions taking place in the urban space. I describe how official measures such as the implementation of a new street nomenclature or the publication of maps to depict the new city, were not only a manifestation of the elite’s desires to redesign the urban space but were also intended to help people in general conceiving the city under the evolutionist guise of progress, thus transforming the relationship with the city they inhabited.

Since traditional uses of space conflicted with new cultural habits and technologies, representatives of local authorities – who endorsed the idea of progress – tried to regulate the use of public space according to their aspirations for a modern city.\(^\text{140}\) The new measures dramatically disrupted existing notions of public space, thus affecting the spatial distribution of entertainment activities, such as the carpas shows, which were gradually segregated from the urban center. I illustrate how Eurocentric notions of art, hygiene, and culture coalesced and predominated in the authorities’ criteria for changes in the name of progress. The postcolonial approach I take to tackle this problem is based on a transhistorical analogy: while in the sixteenth century the idea of civilization through Christianity was used by conquerors to justify the despoiling and genocide of the American continent and its people, in the nineteenth century the idea of “progress” was invoked to

\(^{140}\) A collection of essays providing an overview of the socio-economic transformations that Mexico underwent during the 19th century in its struggle for international recognition as a “civilized” country, can be consulted in Claudia Agostoni and Elisa Speckman Guerra, eds. *Modernidad, tradición y alteridad.*
justify the control of the city and the regulation of its public space. This involved the classification, exclusion and marginalization of the most disadvantaged people inhabiting that space.

In this chapter I demonstrate that many of the administrative objections to the carpas theaters were also shared by the established theaters in the city, and that both classes of objections were in turn due to major infrastructural problems in the city. However, it was the precarious construction of the carpas theaters that was used as an argument to introduce the geographic segregation of the theaters, and to stigmatize of their audiences. Discourses about the carpas and their music helped characterize them both legally and intersubjectively in a negative light, and helped the elites to preserve symbolic and de facto power. Beyond their symbolic effects, the regulations or unofficial negotiations of public space for musical entertainment had material effects on people’s access to and possible appropriations of these spaces. As authorities implemented the restructuring [ordenamiento] of the downtown area by making it appealing to foreign eyes, they gradually displaced the jacalones de zarzuela to the outskirts of the center to hide their “outrageous” appearance and questionable morality. The effects of this segregation not only created differential experiences of the city, they also contributed to greater differentiation between types of citizens.

**Building a City for the New Century: 1900-1910**

As the year 1910 approached, officials of General Díaz’s government devoted great attention to organizing the festivities for the Centennial of Independence. From the first years of the century, Díaz’s officers had planned a festivity that would provide a suitable occasion to showcase Mexico’s economic success and political maturity, while also serving to reignite sympathies and popular support for what was clearly a stagnant government. The celebration tangibly propelled urban planning.
During this decade, the Comission of Public Works and Beautification (Comisión de Obras Públicas y Embellecimiento) was the official organization in charge of urban planning and development. Three very influential men in this organization envisioned the future of the city: Nicolás Mariscal, Miguel Angel de Quevedo and Jesús Galindo y Villa. As the historian Estela Eguiarte Sakar has shown in detail, they not only advanced the first major projects to prepare the city for a new era, but also disseminated their ideas through governmental publications and specialized journals addressed to other educated men.\textsuperscript{141} Frequently too, they traveled to Europe and North America to represent Mexican urban planning and to gather ideas they wanted to adopt for their capital city.

Since the ideas proposed by this trio were mostly motivated by their desire to obtain international recognition for their country, their plans were based on European and North American models, represented by Paris, London and New York.\textsuperscript{142} Therefore, these men were in charge of a larger project of urban renovation that included sanitation, transportation and communication projects to be introduced both in public spaces and in private houses. And because the image of the City and its leisure spaces played a crucial role within the larger project, all three architects devoted considerable attention to refurbish public spaces. Mariscal was mostly interested in landscape architecture, hence his wish to boost the scenic character of the city by making it both beautiful and functional at the same time.\textsuperscript{143} De Quevedo declared his interest in developing leisure and ornamental spaces to “attract wealthy tourists from all countries.” As he stated, what he wanted for

\textsuperscript{141} Two of these were the Boletín oficial del consejo de gobierno del Distrito Federal, directed by Galindo y Villa, and El arte y la ciencia, funded and directed by Mariscal. See Estela Eguiarte Sakar, “La idea del espacio urbano en la planeación de la ciudad de México: 1900-1911” in Miradas Recurrentes: La ciudad de México en los siglos XIX y XX. (Instituto Mora: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2004), 311-332.


\textsuperscript{143} Eguiarte Sakar, 319.
Mexico was “the ideal of hygiene and comfort characteristic of England, and the beauty and art of the French.” Galindo y Villa, for his part, was inspired by London; his goal was to implement urban gardens in places such as Chapultepec, Alameda Central and El Paseo de Santa Anita.

Together with new gardens and big public squares, urban landscaping projects were instrumental to making the city pleasant to the eye. To excuse the many inconveniences caused by the demolitions, Galindo y Villa recalled the urban project that Napoleon III had entrusted to Baron Hausmann in Paris, believing that the simple mention of the French city would mesmerize the Mexican Capitalino elites and thus justify the disturbances. Addressed to those men “with resources”, his discourse appealed to educated men’s sense of taste, thus contributing to create the symbolic space of the elites.

In Paris, Napoleon transformed the old city of the civilized world, whose ample avenues and numerous parks have been transformed into the most pleasant residence for any man of taste or resources. Among us, the works of sanitation have forced us to demolish some old mansions [caserones], and even entire blocks, in the interest of sanitation and beauty. In addition to hygiene and beauty, authorities expected that the City would also be functional for the new needs for transportation and communication. One of the major changes at the end of the nineteenth century was the rearrangement of the city’s street plan, a project that continued a transformative process started in the mid-nineteenth century with the confiscation of the church’s properties. As much as these physical transformations responded to contemporary ideas about

---

144 Miguel Ángel de Quevedo, “Espacios”, (1911): 313, quoted in Eguiarte Sakar, 329.

145 Galindo y Villa in “Estética,” (1904): 804, quoted in Eguiarte Sakar, 323. “En París, Napoleón transformó la vieja ciudad del mundo civilizado, cuyas amplias avenidas y numerosos parques los han convertido en la residencia más grata para todo hombre de gusto o de recursos. Entre nosotros, las obras de saneamiento nos han obligado a hacer desaparecer algunos viejos caserones y aún manzanas enteras, con beneplácito de la salubridad y de la estética.”

146 Through the Ley Lerdo (1857) and during his interim government (1858-1865), Benito Juárez propelled the process of desamortización de bienes, whereby the estate of the church was confiscated to become the property of the national State. During his official terms as president (1867-1872), Juárez proposed a plan to modernize the city, and then authorized the fragmentation of ecclesiastic buildings in order to redistribute urban spaces and to redesign the City according to a grid plan. Porfirio Díaz, Juárez’ successor, continued the process of modernization not only in the city but in the country at large.
architecture, they were also in accordance with processes of cultural change that had ensued during the years immediately following independence. Moreover, the introduction of new transportation technology had a severe impact on the physiognomy of the city. The checkerboard model of street arrangement, first introduced in the early colonial period, was updated into an even more regular pattern to facilitate the mobility of electric and motorized vehicles.

**Changing the Relationship with the City**

Changes to the physiognomy, geography and equipment of the city modified the city-dwellers’ relationship with the places they inhabited; but a change of attitude was also necessary among city dwellers to reflect the modern times Mexico was entering. As local authorities understood it, the symbolic factors that made up the urban space had to be modified too, in order to achieve such a change of attitude, as well as to ignite the people’s desire for an ordered, civilized city that would work as the centerpiece of the new, modern Mexican nation. The introduction of a new street nomenclature was one of the clearest manifestations of this kind of symbolic reform. Changing the streets’ former allegorical names into numerals, for example, reflected the official desire to become a more rational, disaffected, and secular society, a change that would showcase Mexico’s firm advance on the road of progress.

---

147 Lucía Mier y Terán Rocha has provided details of the dialogical processes that simultaneously shaped urban planning, architecture and cultural change in the downtown area of the city, even from the early colonial times. Her exhaustively documented research, mainly based on *Actas de Cabildo*, has helped historians of Mexico City to understand not only the ideologies that inspired the creation of the colonial city after the destruction of the pre-hispanic city of Tenochtitlán, but also to interpret the breakages and continuities with native notions of urban planning. See Lucía Mier y Terán Rocha, *La primera traza de la Ciudad de México, 1524-1535.* (México: FCE-UAM, 2005).

148 Angel Rama has explained the significance of the checkerboard pattern in the planning of American Colonial cities. In his view, this geographical pattern was a projection of aspirations for a “modern” future whose tenets were grounded on the principle of rationalism. The principles of Cartesian geometry served as uncontestable organizing principles. See Angel Rama, *The Lettered City.* Chasteen John Charles (tr.) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.
Examination of a selection of maps of Mexico City between the years 1881 and 1900 allows further inferences in this regard. The earlier maps suggest that streets named after the distinctive features of specific loci fomented a direct connection between the visual sign, the sonic sign and the experience of transiting and inhabiting the urban space. While in the first half of the nineteenth century streets bore names such as “Calle del Nopalito” (Street of the cactus tree) or “Calle del Puente del Cuervo” (Street of the Raven’s bridge), after the nomenclature change they lost their visual and experiential referents, to become “Sur 2,” (South 2), “5ta de Oriente,” (5th from the East). Occasionally street names also commemorated politicians and other public figures such as the street “3ra Degollado” which memorialized military leader José Santos Degollado who, during Juárez presidency, served as Secretary of War and Navy and Secretary of External Affairs, thus bespeaking of the recent political history of the country. Map 2- Appendix no 4).149

A map from 1881 displaying names such as “Street of the broom store” (Calle de la escobillería) or “Street of the tanners” (Calle de los curtidores) sheds light, for instance, on the possible working uses of spaces. Meanwhile “Street of the standing-up” (Calle de los parados) or “Street of the Celaya Pulque bar” (Calle de la pulquería de Celaya) may have alluded to leisure activities taking place in these corners. “Street of the store for men” (Calle del estanco de hombres”) and “Street of the store for women” (Calle del estanco de mugeres) [sic] suggest a divided sociability assigned by gender (Appendix no 5).150 Meanwhile the abundance of streets named after monasteries, churches, temples, saints, virgins and priests shows traces of the City’s colonial past. “Back street of the convent of Mercy” (Calle trasera de la misericordia”) and “Street of the false door of St. Dominic” (Calle de la puerta falsa de Santo Domingo) suggest that inhabitants may have


150 “Plano Central de la Ciudad de México” (1881).
experienced spatial disorientation in the treacherous and hidden corners of the city. And names such as “Street of the sad indian” (Calle del indio triste) condensed urban legends and stories around the affective perceptions of the city’s residents, as fondly compiled by urban chroniclers.  

Plausibly the frequent alterations to the arrangement and names of streets made during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries disoriented citizens, who did not so easily adjust to the new spatial layouts. In some cases, even Ayuntamiento officers requested documentation to learn the new names of streets. In fact, the affective impact of such modifications was so deeply felt that even half a century later, city chroniclers still lamented what was lost in the numerous nomenclature reformations of the first half of the 20th century. In a comment written in 1953, urban planner Enrique Aragón Echeagaray criticized how during the modernization craze of the nineteenth century and the Porfirian the naming of the streets closely reflected the State’s agenda:

From Independence to nowadays, the nomenclature of Mexico City has destroyed its old tradition; [...] political circumstances and patriotic reasons fill the names of squares and avenues. Most recently, bad taste and lack of planning, [lack of] love for that which is ours and for the past, have caused the nomenclature of our urban arteries to become a hard-to-understand confusion.  

Indeed, during the Porfirian regime, emblematic names such as “16 de Septiembre” or “5 de Mayo,” were given strategically to commemorate the battles fought to consolidate the independent nation.

---

151 The legend of this street’s name recalls an Indian hired by the Spanish governors during the colonial period to act as a spy on other native Mexicans, as Spanish conquerors feared the possibility of rebel uprisings. The Indian enjoyed all kind of privileges, such as access to fine clothing, meals, pulque and sexual services. His concupiscence, drunkenness and despair caused him to disregard his appointed duty. Instead of killing him, the Spanish governors deprived him of all his former privileges. Since then, the legend says, he was seen sitting on the ground on this street, crying in despair “the way Indians do.” For a compilation of legends of the streets of Mexico City see Luis Gonzalez Obregón, Las calles de México (Ediciones Botas: México), 1927.

152 See for example AHDF- SVP, Vol. 3229, File 183, where “Lorenzo Castillo, solicita se le expida una copia de las actas que se levantaron con motivo de la nueva nomenclatura de las calles de la ciudad.”

153 “De la Independencia a la fecha, la nomenclatura de la ciudad de México, ha ido destrozando su vieja tradición; […] circunstancias políticas y razones patrióticas llenan de nombres las plazas y avenidas. Y en los últimos tiempos un mal gusto y una carencia de programa, de amor por lo nuestro y por lo pasado, han hecho que la nomenclatura de nuestras arterias urbanas, sea una confusión difícil de entender.” Enrique Aragón Echeagaray. México: ciudad multiforme (México: Publicaciones Atlántida, 1953), 105.
The expectation was that the new names would also help to establish a new civic calendar that was first and foremost secular. A sense of cosmopolitanism and postcolonial unity was hinted at by names such as República de Chile, República del Salvador, República de Uruguay, República de Cuba, República de Brazil. These names, still in use, made a political statement by celebrating an American continent freed of colonial domination; they coincided with the salutations Díaz made in 1910 to these countries in the Centennial of the Mexican independence—ironically enough, only weeks before the fall of his regime.

In many cases, Mexico City’s inhabitants responded to these radical changes by writing nostalgic recollections, as if trying to capture not only the shifting material milieu, but also the sensorial stimuli the streets evoked. For example, in an article entitled “El alma vieja de la ciudad”, published in 1929, journalist Xavier Sorondo explains not only his emotional reaction to the changes in place-names, but also a critical interpretation of the ideological agenda of the post-Revolutionary State:

Surely in its ample, paved avenues the legend, hidden like the owls in the towers of the churches and in the rooms of colonial houses, would not be able to walk […] All the virtue of the past, however, is in this moldering and crumbling Mexico against whose crusts of dirt and vice, the aseptic measures of the Superior Council of Sanitation slip, like a fiery horse [scrambling to get its footing] in the mud. But the names of the streets, absurd and anachronistic, were a puzzle for the shiny new Department of Traffic, and a maze for taxi drivers, who had to keep under their caps a directory of the city with four thousand different names. Besides, they represented a serious sin in the face of the hyperbolic purification of the Revolution: their innocent stories would have provoked reactionary trains of thought, and the legends they evoked would shelter a conservative spirit, witness to and critic of the new work. That is why the names of the streets had to be changed.

154 “Reducción del Plano Oficial de la ciudad de México, Dirección de Obras Públicas y de la Oficina Técnica de Saneamiento”, (1900).

155 These dates respectively commemorate México’s Independence Day and the successful battle against the second French Interventionist attack in 1862.


157 “Por supuesto que por sus avenidas anchas y asfaltadas no podría caminar la leyenda que, como los búhos se esconde en las torres de las iglesias y en las habitaciones de las casas virreinales […] Toda la virtud del pasado, sin embargo, está en ese México viejo que se apolilla y se derrumba y contra cuya costras de mugre y vicio resbalan las medidas acépticas [sic] del Consejo Superior de Salubridad, como potro fogoso en barrizal. Pero los nombres de sus calles, absurdos y anacrónicos, resultaban un rompecabezas para el flamante departamento de tráfico y un laberinto para los conductores de taxis, que tenían que almacenar bajo la gorra un directorio de la ciudad con cuatro mil nombres distintos. Además,
Along with naming, cartography was another instrument for effectively instilling new sentiments for the city. A commercial directory published in 1881 illustrates this point. Although organized following map conventions, this map was entitled “Commercial Directory of Mexico City.” The map exemplifies how cartographic representations are not just simple depictions of the spatial distribution of a city, but also work as symbolic instruments to shape notions of space according to the agendas of the current authorities. (Fig. 2.1.)

**Figure 2.1.** “Directorio Comercial de la Ciudad de México.” (1883) Detail taken from Julio Popper Ferry. (See Map 5).

158 For full map see Appendix 7 "Directorio Comercial de la Ciudad de México." Mexico City 1883, Planoteca del INAH- 0708-090.
As part of the modernist reverie of the elites and the ruling classes, this map contributed to perceiving, imagining and experiencing the city in a way that was more congenial to the ongoing economic and ideological changes.

From its early years, Díaz’ government encouraged foreign investment and stimulated the introduction of credit systems. Therefore, entrepreneurs mainly from France, England, and North America built new commercial establishments. Stylized buildings, (which are now iconic of the downtown area), were built during the first decade of the twentieth century. The construction of these buildings resulted in a retail district that displaced local businesses, while also giving Mexico City’s downtown considerable prestige. Examples of these well-known businesses are the department store Fábricas de Francia (nowadays known as El Palacio de Hierro (the Iron Palace) due to the grandiose iron structure of its downtown store), entirely built with French capital; the German hardware store Casa Boker; the La Esmeralda jewelry store; the Universal Drugstore; and the Centro Mercantil. The symbolic worth of these buildings was so high that in the Guía General Descriptiva de la República Mexicana (General Descriptive Guide to the Mexican Republic, 1899), J. Figueroa Domenech, one of Díaz’ ideological allies, pointed out: “if the great credit establishments, the important railroads, and the various factories […] reveal the wealth of Mexico’s soil and industriousness of its inhabitants, the luxuries and good taste of its retail stores reveal the culture and civilization of its people.”

---


160 “Si los grandes establecimientos de crédito, los importantes ferrocarriles y las varias fábricas […] revelan desde luego la riqueza del suelo de México y la laboriosidad de sus habitantes, el lujo y buen gusto de sus casas de comercio revelan la cultura y la civilización de su pueblo.” Domenech J. Figueroa, Guía general descriptiva de la República Mexicana, (México-Barcelona: Ramón de S.N. Araluce, 1899), 255.
The commercial profile that entrepreneurs and government officers desired for the city led cartographers to omit all buildings and public spaces that did not fit the profile. Angel Rama has argued that maps are “operative cultural models” that, through signs, insert ideologies and cultural values, organizing the perception of reality, and thus creating it. Furthermore, because maps also reflect someone’s desire, they are instruments of power:

Instead of representing things already existing, signs can be made to represent things as yet only imagined – the ardently desired objects of an age that displayed a special fondness for utopian dreams. Thus the manipulation of signs opened the way to a futurism characteristic of the modern era, an attitude that has attained an almost delirious apotheosis in our own day. The dreams of a future order served to perpetuate the reigning political power and its attendant social, economic and cultural structures. In addition, any discourse raised in opposition to the reigning power was required henceforth to establish credibility by presenting an alternative dream of the future.\textsuperscript{161}

As Serge Gruzinski explained too in \textit{La colonización de lo imaginario}, these symbolic recourses require numerous and varied forms in order to be effective.\textsuperscript{162} In the nineteenth century, such graphic representations of the city had relevant effects not only on how the urban space was conceived, but also on ensuing measures for controlling the uses of public space. It is easy to see how these measures intersected with a musical scene that, like that of the carpas, developed in the streets of the city.

**Formal Theaters and the City’s Deficient Infrastructure**

In the midst of this modernizing project, musical theater had also played an important role ever since the early years of the nineteenth century. The governing classes deemed that concert halls

\textsuperscript{161} Ángel Rama, \textit{The Lettered City}, 8.

\textsuperscript{162} Gruzinski’s essay, now classic in Mexican historiography, consists of a cultural history of the process by which the epistemic grounds of native Mexican knowledge were gradually transformed and eventually colonized by the overpowering effect of Spanish colonialist culture. This included all scientific knowledge, oral traditions and expressive cultures. As a result, the remaining historical evidence, even if written by Indians, was inscribed according to the principles of the Spanish episteme, thus obscuring any trace of the native culture. Serge Jorge Gruzinski Ferreiro, \textit{La colonización de lo imaginario : sociedades indígenas y occidentalización en el México español, siglos XVI-XVIII}. (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1991).
should not only reflect the culture of Mexican citizens but should also showcase the architectural magnificence and power of the city. Insofar as theater and opera were considered civilizing agents, representatives of the local government paid special attention to cultivating these expressive forms in the city, as well as to preserving the appearance of the venues that hosted them. This responded to a clear political interest: just as trans-culturation of the opera became a priority in independent Mexico, the need to build theaters to cultivate this musical practice became a priority as well, thus showcasing the culture of the Mexican people.

Yet another map published in 1900 depicts the central location of the main theaters available in the metropolis—those that were to serve as clear evidence of the culture and progress of the City (See Appendix 5 “Map of 1900”).

Due to the iconic role of formal theaters as temples of culture, Díaz’ government showed special interest in refurbishing them. In 1894, “a commission was assigned to visit the theaters of the capital in order to search [consultar] the modifications that needed to be introduced to their current conditions of hygiene.”

In 1902 as a result of the commission’s findings the operators of formal theaters were obliged to undertake numerous structural modifications, particularly concerning bathroom facilities. The modifications were especially required from established theaters Arbeu, Hidalgo y Riva Palacio. As decreed in the first article of the official “Regulation of Theaters”:

No theater will be open to public service, -- and those that exist currently will not continue their services--unless the President of the Ayuntamiento has granted permission. In order that the President of the Ayuntamiento grant said permission, it will be absolutely indispensable that [I] the Direction of Public Works verify if the building has the conditions of solidity and security required in respect to the number of people it can hold. II. The report from the Superior Council of Sanitation [be obtained], attesting that the venue complies with the conditions stated in the Sanitary code. III,

163 “Nombramiento de una comisión que visite los teatros de la Capital y consulte las modificaciones que deben introducirse en sus actuales condiciones higiénicas.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 804, File 832, (1894).

164 Memorias del Ayuntamiento 1902, Section “Diversiones.”
that Managers and entrepreneurs have complied with the rest of the conditions and regulations stated in this regulation.165

Among the modifications that the Commission of Theaters requested to theaters such as Teatro Ideal, Hidalgo, Principal, Lírico, Colón or Arbeu, were: increased number of and proper habilitation of toilets, which were also to be separated for male and female use; replacement of old and ragged curtains; improvement of the lighting system; and enhancement of ventilation to avoid bad smells. The need for such improvements demonstrates that even formal theaters had severe structural problems.

Dreams of cosmopolitanism aside, at the turn of the century the city was still challenged by blatant problems of urban infrastructure. Despite urban planners’ good intentions, hygiene continued being a serious problem in the city. The deficient drainage system increased the vulnerability of a city which, built on a lakebed, was surrounded by canals that flooded every rainy season.166 The sanitary problems of the city not only tainted its reputation as a civilized place, but made Díaz’ modernizing efforts seem in vain. The lack of functional drainage caused ruinous floods, and the deficient sewage system was a severe danger to public health. As a remedial measure, numerous projects were envisaged which included the building of aqueducts, underground wastewater disposal systems, artesian wells, and public fountains with potable fresh water. Nevertheless, the initiation of all these projects not only incited heated debate concerning the

---

165 “Ningún teatro podrá abrirse al servicio público, y los que están en la actualidad no continuarán en dicho servicio, sin previo permiso del Presidente del Ayuntamiento. Para que el Presidente del Ayuntamiento conceda el permiso, será absolutamente indispensable que la Dirección de Obras Públicas verifique si el edificio tiene las condiciones de solidez y seguridad que se requieren en relación con el número de personas que deba contener. II. El informe del Consejo Superior de salubridad, declarando que el local reúne las condiciones exigidas por el código sanitario III. Que se hayan llenado por los propietarios o arrendatarios de los teatros, la demás condiciones y requisitos que marca este reglamento.” Reglamento de Teatros (1894), 3.

166 Numerous documents in the Ayuntamiento collection allow historians to see that the problem of water disposal was a pressing one. While the planning of appropriate sewage and water system distribution had been important since the sixteenth century, the demographic growth of the nineteenth century made it even more urgent. All these problems have been thoroughly studied by historians of Mexico City.
ownership of the liquid resource, but it also provoked considerable resistance among those neighbors who refused to adjust their habits and dwellings to facilitate the urban transformations.¹⁶⁷

Official requirements intended to improve hygiene in theaters continued during the first decade of the century. The typhus epidemic of 1906 raised concern and awareness about the need to increase hygienic measures in theaters and other public places. Besides issuing strict instructions about the rehabilitation of bathroom facilities in formal theaters, the Office of Public Entertainment decreed a one-hour lapse between the afternoon and the evening shows, to allow proper ventilation and let fresh air in to the room to kill the “vicious atmosphere [air] that was contrary to sanitation.”¹⁶⁸

Nevertheless, in most cases, the formal theaters were unable to comply with official ordinances. After paying a visit to the Teatro Principal— the main theater of the capital city — in 1912 councilor Carlos Patiño provided a detailed description of the problems of hygiene it still faced:

The air breathed during the time the audience watches the show suffers modifications that are prejudicial to the health, for the air starts to rarefy due to the elevation of temperature produced by the conglomeration. This rarefaction proportionately diminishes the oxygen necessary for breathing, and the carbonic acid from exhalations augments the dangers of the rarefied air.¹⁶⁹

Patiño’s report is characteristically expressed in a scientific, neutral style that avoids all reference to the people in the audience who would have expelled the “carbonic acid” — a byproduct of the breathing process — he describes. This rather vague report avoids any mention of who was

¹⁶⁷ One of the most frequent problems registered in the Ayuntamiento archive is the number of neighbors who refused to pay taxes for water use. Their arguments intersected with a problem of social class: citizens whose salary was below 200.00 pesos per year requested a waiver. Others argued that since there was no running water in their houses, it was absurd and unjust to pay the tax; yet others sustained that water “was their own property”, while others still, refused to let authorities modify their houses to facilitate the advancement of the project. AHDF- Aguas- Vol. 44, years 1890-1902; AHDF, Aguas Vol. 45, years 1890-1902. See also Memorias del Ayuntamiento years 1890 to 1910.


¹⁶⁹ “El aire que se respira durante el tiempo que permanece el público en el espectáculo, sufre modificaciones perjudiciales a la salud, pues comienza por enrarecerse debido a la elevación de la temperatura que produce la aglomeración, este enrarecimiento disminuye en proporción el oxígeno necesario para la respiración y el ácido carbónico exhalado aumenta los peligros del aire enrarecido.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 807, File 1327, (1912).
responsible for such bad odours and “rarefied air.” My guess is that such evasiveness was mean to conceal that certain practices such as spitting or disposing of garbage under the seats were common among audience members at this venue, considered one – if not the most – distinguished in the city. When read against the grain, the omissions in Patiño’s account typify the silences implied in the inscription of historic evidence.

Sanitation during the Revolution did not improve, and in certain periods it became worse. Because battles between opposing parties during the “Ten Tragic Days” (February 1912) sometimes took place in the streets, the horrid spectacle of putrid corpses decomposing in public squares caused massive concern. Once the armed phase of the Revolution was over, the post-revolutionary government advanced renewed and stricter measures for public hygiene and appearance, which included the appearance and sanitation of formal theaters.

Towards the 1920s, under the new administration of Alvaro Obregón, attempts to improve the main venues of entertainment in the city reflected an appreciation of the educational role of theaters lingering from colonial years. Ayuntamiento officers in charge of supervising the carpas and other theaters dictated: “Let us not forget that theaters must be educational centers for the people [el pueblo], not only in what concerns hygiene, but also in comfort and aesthetics.”

Consequently, in 1921, the Department of Public Sanitation required a new list of the city’s entertainment centers to keep a close eye, or I should rather say, a piercing nose on them. Between 1920 and 1922, the Department of Public Sanitation issued a proposition forcing all theaters, whether formal or provisional, to disinfect their facilities at least an hour before their shows


171 “No olvidar que los teatros deben ser centros educativos para el pueblo, no solo bajo el punto de vista de la higiene, sino también del confort y del sentido estético.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1717 (1922):

started, using a mixture they called “creolina.” But because the problem of open-air sewage had not been fully solved by the 1920s, bad odors from outside of the theaters still reached the noses of audiences and inspectors. Frequent complaints made it evident that this was a priority. As a result, construction of an underground sewage system “fitting for the culture of the city” was expedited in the central streets where the main theaters were located. However, the peripheral blocks remained unattended.

**Policing the Hygiene and Appearance of the Carpas**

The problem of lack of sanitary infrastructure was generalized in the City, and the challenges that keeping the city clean posed to the local government further strained existing tensions between social classes. In spite of official interest in the city’s appearance, archival registers reveal that since the 1880s the Ayuntamiento office had granted numerous petitions to establish popular *salones de diversiones* or *teatros provisionales* in streets and central plazas in the downtown area. While such authorization illustrated the authorities’ determination “to keep the lower classes away from crime”, the disheveled appearance of the jacalones awoke the anxieties of those who thought of themselves as cleaner and, in general terms, more cultured. Tensions between social classes clearly impacted the attempts for regulation of hygiene in the carpas. The historian Mario Barbosa has explained that the battlefields of this class conflict were the streets, the markets, the public plazas and entertainment centers:

The change propelled by modern ideas was not easily assimilated by the majorities; the persistence of traditional practices led the elites to blame them for insalubriousness and the consequent illnesses and epidemics. With moral tinges, hygienist discourses often referred to the

---

173 *Todos los empresarios y encargados de teatros y cines quedan obligados a desinfectar sus respectivos locales, una hora antes de comenzar los espectáculos usando al efecto y con la necesaria abundancia, soluciones de creolina u otro desinfectante parecido […] que los inspectores de diversiones presencien la desinfección diariamente y rindan parte.”* Proposición para que sean desinfectados todos los espectáculos de esta ciudad, una hora antes de principiar estos, AHDF-SDP. Vol. 810, File 1581, (1920-1922).
practices of the poor majorities in both open and enclosed spaces, and in both personal and collective hygienic habits.\textsuperscript{174}

Campaigns in defense of hygiene had as their champions cleansing pens of inspectors, journalists and urban chroniclers. Although councilors and inspectors of public entertainment were not necessarily members of the elites in power, their reports and descriptions inscribed the discourses of “poorness” associated with the carpas theaters that have subsequently served to historicize them. The common people were differentiated from the elites based on prejudices concerning the former’s hygiene practices. Revealingly, while the sanitary reports on formal theaters make no association between the people’s hygienic habits and their social class, in the reports on the carpas, the bad odors, and the measures needed to combat them, are often credited to the “special audiences that concur there.”

The detrimental image of the carpas was as much due to the provisional condition of the materials used for their construction as to the fact that these theaters emerged as a by-product of modernization. As entire blocks were demolished and grandiose Europeanized buildings were erected, vacant lots multiplied, thus opening spaces where variety companies could settle their tents. Emerging in the crevices of the urban transformations, these small theaters with their meager appearances contrasted sharply with the official aspirations for modernization. During the second decade of the century, therefore, the city council’s officers extended their control over the carpas to include their appearance and conditions of security.

Ayuntamiento registers of the year 1921 kept record of the small formal theaters existing in the city, as well as of the carpa-theatres that were authorized to settle in the downtown area (Fig 2.2).\textsuperscript{175} Due to their temporary nature, the number of carpa-theaters in the city varied according to

\textsuperscript{174} Mario Barbosa Cruz, \textit{El trabajo en las calles: subsistencia y negociación política en la ciudad de México a comienzos del siglo XX}, (México: El Colegio de México: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, 2008), 180-181.

\textsuperscript{175} AHDF-SDP, Vol 808, (File dated May 17th, 1921), and Vol. 810.
the calendar of public festivities. Permissions to install these theaters increased during September, the month of Independence festivities, and again from the celebration of All Saints in November, and at Christmas season (a period that in Mexico extends from December 12th, the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe, to January 6th, Epiphany or Day of the Three Kings). By contrast, the carpas would be closed down or reduced during Easter celebrations. The restriction most likely also included lent.176

Figure 2.2. List of established revista theaters and carpas-jacalones authorized in the downtown area in 1921.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theater</th>
<th>Address</th>
<th>Musical repertory</th>
<th>Neighborhood</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Arbeu</td>
<td>Av. República del Salvador 55</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Colón</td>
<td>4ta calle de Bolivar</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Casino</td>
<td>5a. calle de Guerrero 109</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro E. Iris</td>
<td>Calle de Donceles 36</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Ideal</td>
<td>1ra Calle de Dolores 8</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Lírico</td>
<td>Calle de Medinas 46</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro V. Fábregas</td>
<td>1ra calle de Donceles</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Principal</td>
<td>3ra calle de Bolivar 30</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Hidalgo</td>
<td>2da Calle de Regina 52</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teatro Olimpia</td>
<td>Av. 16 de Septiembre 11</td>
<td>Zarzuela and Revista</td>
<td>Central downtown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpa Uranga</td>
<td>Mixcalco</td>
<td>Género chico, revista, variedades musicales</td>
<td>Centro/Merced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpa Ideal</td>
<td>Campo Florido (Moved to 1ra de Dolores no 8, in 1922)</td>
<td>Género chico, revista, variedades musicales</td>
<td>Tepito /</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpa María Guerrero</td>
<td>8va de Brasil, 99</td>
<td>Género chico, revista, género psicalíptico</td>
<td>Tepito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpa Jesus Torres 1</td>
<td>1ra de Netzahualcóyot</td>
<td>Género chico, revista, variedades musicales</td>
<td>Sta. Ma. La Redonda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpa Jesús Torres 2</td>
<td>Plazuela de la Alhóndiga</td>
<td>Género chico, revista, variedades musicales</td>
<td>Sta. Ma. La Redonda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carpa Habana México</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>Género chico, revista, variedades musicales</td>
<td>Sta. Ma. La Redonda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While chances are high that these modest jacalones faced serious sanitary problems, it seems to me that the question of whether the carpas theaters were dirtier than formal theaters is something that cannot be determined from the existing evidence. As I have already suggested, the problem was

more a consequence of a generalized lack of urban equipment than a consequence of the hygienic habits of the audiences. Furthermore, because the official disinfecting measure was applied to “all entertainment centers,” one can infer that bacteria did not distinguish between formal and informal theaters. Ironically, due to the prejudice against carpa audiences, it may be possible that these small theatres were actually cleaner than their formal counterparts, since they were disinfected more often and more thoroughly, given that control over them was stricter.

As with the formal theaters, bad smells around the carpa theaters continued to be a concern. A possible cause was that the refurbishment of the city center took place gradually, and not all at once. As a result, urban areas where drainage renovation had been delayed were the ones where the installation of carpa theaters was most likely to be authorized. A case in point is the Mesones Street (Calle de Mesones), a street near the Vizcaínas Square (Plaza de las Vizacaínas) frequently referred in inspectors’ reports as “malodorous due to the old drainage.”

Not surprisingly, permits to install jácalones in this area, also known for being a place where prostitution was practiced, were easily granted.

Notwithstanding the lingering prejudice against the poor and working classes, the post-revolutionary government was convinced that its legitimacy would come from the support of ‘the masses’, therefore licenses for carpa theaters even increased during the 1920s. A significant

177 AHDF. SDP, Vol. 812, File 1717 (1922).

178 In her doctoral dissertation, Guadalupe Ríos de la Torre refers the Official Regulation of Prostitution, a document issued in 1914. This regulation was part of the new political measures to appease the social anxiety caused by the war through the creation of what were then called “tolerance areas.” The areas where prostitution was authorized and even protected by authorities coincided with streets where installation of many carpa theaters was also granted; for example, the streets of Cuauhtemotzin (today’s Fray Servando), aka the “Barrio Latino”, Niño Perdido (today’s Eje Central), the Plaza de las Vizcaínas, Isabel la Católica, República de Panamá, and Santa María la Redonda. See Guadalupe Ríos de la Torre, Sexualidad y prostitución en la ciudad de México durante el porfiriato y la Revolución mexicana (1910-1920) (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. 2004) [Ph. D Dissertation], 117-118. A second historical account of prostitution in Mexico City during the years 1920s and 1930s also offers a thorough explanation of the different Regulations of Prostitution during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The author also refers the same streets as places where prostitution was practiced with the avowal of authorities: Katherine Elaine Bliss, Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001), 153-166.
difference between the formal theaters and the jacalones is that the latter, for the most part, did not possess sanitary facilities. As one report explained in 1922, “WC’s for the audience these carpas do not have either, except for the [carpa] Jesús Torres, which has a provisional WC that does not have a water box and that [one] flushes with water in pails.” What the carpa company members and people in the audience did to fulfill their sanitary needs is left to speculation. Probably they used the facilities available in nearby commercial establishments. Another possibility is that, since a large part of the sewage system had not yet been updated in the peripheral areas of downtown and where carpa permits were most easily granted, people urinated and defecated in the open sewers that still remained.

Understandably, the foul smells around the carpas may have caused even more anxiety among inspectors. But most importantly, they gave an excuse to authorities to blame the carpa companies and their audiences of deficient hygiene while adding yet another reason to resent the “poor” of the city.

Indeed, the proliferation of the jacalones during these years was thus increasingly confined to the less equipped and most abandoned urban spaces, so that they were increasingly associated with the idea of the “poor.” The testimony of Luis Ortega, an urban chronicler and a former audience member in the carpas, reinforces the idea that the carpas resulted from the changing physiognomy of the city and they subsequently flourished within it.

It is easy to understand that the people (el pueblo) that abandoned silent films and that did not yet accept the Anglophone talkies with Spanish subtitles – because they did not know how to read–would seek after entertainment at THE CARPA, a spectacle that was tailored to their taste and measure. That is why these little theatres, like the poor circuses, found a spot to settle in any vacant spaces.

179 “Excusados para el público y para el personal tampoco los tienen estas carpas, salvo la Jesús Torres, que cuenta con un excusado provisional, que no tiene caja lavadora y se limpia con agua en cubetas.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1708 (1922).
lot, of which there were many in the barrios, or even in central areas were the project of urban refurbishing had demolished old buildings.\textsuperscript{180} [capitalization in the original].

Ortega characterizes the “poor” by articulating symbolic spaces that separate the carpas from elite groups. By opting for the word \textit{pueblo} over the collective, more class-neutral noun \textit{gente}, Ortega reinforces the associations of these theaters with the underprivileged and the working classes. He then implies that the carpa shows were spectacles for the illiterate, to whom he ascribes a particular, albeit non-explicit, sense of taste. Finally, he compares the carpas with “the poor circuses” and points out that the carpas found their niche in the barrios. The terms \textit{barrio} and \textit{barriadas} denoted marginal areas inhabited by low-income sectors of the populace. Although not too far from downtown, they lacked the infrastructure of the central area, Unsurprisingly, a newspaper article titled “Sucia barriada que avergüenza esta capital,” (“Dirty barriada that causes shame to the capital”) talks of these neighborhoods in pejorative terms revealing the disdain they inspired among journalists and authorities alike.\textsuperscript{181}

Afraid of the impressions that the carpas could cause to the foreign eye, as much as to public safety, the Ayuntamiento office commissioned inspectors and councilors to include informal theaters in the general supervision of all theaters, trying to ensure that the small jacalones were acceptable for the visual standards desired for the city.\textsuperscript{182} My selection of photographs, all of which were taken in 1928, depicts the outer aspect of four carpa theaters. All were located in the downtown area, as the addresses in their lower edges indicate.

\textsuperscript{180} “Es fácil comprender que el pueblo, que abandonó el cine mudo y no aceptaba aún las películas habladas en inglés con subtítulos en español, porque además no sabía leer, buscara la diversión en LA CARPA, espectáculo que se estaba hecho a su gusto y medida. Por eso proliferaron estos teatrillos que, como los circos pobres, encontraban asiento en cualquier lote baldío de los que había muchos en los barrio, o aún en zonas céntricas dónde la remodelación urbana había derruido viejas construcciones.” [Capitalization in the original]. Luis Ortega, in prologue to \textit{Carpas de México}, 14.

\textsuperscript{181} “Sucia barriada que avergüenza la capital,” \textit{Excélsior}, (June 11th 1924).

\textsuperscript{182} “Comisión para revisar el cumplimiento del Reglamento de Diversiones y el estado de las carpas,” AHDF-SDP. Vol. 812, File 1708, (1922).
Figure 2.3. Carpa Aventino. 7ª Netzahualcoyotl and Av. José Ma. Pino Suárez, 1928”, MAF, No. 44668, 209-2.

Figure 2.4. “Carpa Salón Elena, 4ª Calle de Netzahualcoyotl, 1928”, MAF, No. 44668, 209-3
These photos strongly suggest that, although occasional foreign travelers or tourists could attend these theaters, they were not touristic attractions, but rather part of the every-day life of these neighborhoods. These images also provide information such as the musical repertory offered at the carpas—practically the same as that performed in formal theaters; the modest entrance fee of five to fifteen cents, their reduced size; their location in the middle of the streets and plazas; and, as we can see in the cases of the carpas Mariposa and Elena, their vicinity to quotidian commercial establishments such as milk-stores or bars.

The precarious structure of the small jacalones partially explains official qualms about their presence in downtown. They were far from the standards of progress desired for the city, but they also entailed justifiable concerns for public safety. In their earlier years, at the end of the nineteenth century and before electricity was widely distributed, these theaters were lit by kerosene lamps, a highly flammable substance. This was a legitimate reason of concern, for the events of theaters
burning down had been more or less frequent during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{183} Later, the electric systems used by the companies were jury-rigged and, in many cases, inadequate. Because of fire danger, prohibitions on smoking inside theaters were strictly enforced; audience members, in spite of the frequent fines, often disobeyed the ordinance.

What is more, the strong windstorms and heavy rain typical of Mexico City’s climate during the summer months could potentially represent a threat to the safety of audience. As inspector Felipe del Castillo reported in 1922 about the Carpa Minerva: “the day seven [of May], before the show started, and luckily before the audience had entered the carpa, a strong wind broke one of the latches of the main pole, forcing [the company] to bring the tent down and, consequently, to suspend the show.”\textsuperscript{184} In response to this case, supervision of the carpas’ conditions of operation intensified. To avoid further accidents, many of the inspectors even requested the intervention of the “Department of Public Works” (Departamento de Obras Públicas), because, as they said, “many of them were about to fall down.” The operators of the carpa Minerva were unable to comply with the improvements asked of them, and it was closed down three months later.\textsuperscript{185}

Bad weather was often catastrophic for the carpas’ business, because heavy rain scared people away, and because it could ruin the theater, costumes, scenography and prompts of the companies. But while carpa companies were mostly concerned about the losses caused by extreme climatic events, authorities were mostly preoccupied about the chaos created inside and around the

\textsuperscript{183} This was a preoccupation awoken by formal theaters as well as by carpas. In 1922, the carpa India Bonita caught fire, however, the cause of the fire had nothing to do with the installation but rather with a “minor who threw a cloth with paraffin at the top of the tent.”AHDF Vol. 825, File 1661. The concern for fires applied to both carpas and theaters. In fact as late as 1932, long after the introduction of electric light, the Teatro del Renacimiento burnt down raising further concerns for the conditions of safety in all theaters of the city. See Manuel Mañón, Historia del teatro principal (México: Editorial Cultura, 1932).

\textsuperscript{184} “El día siete antes de principiar la función, y por fortuna sin que el publico hubiese entrado al la carpa, un fuerte viento reventó unas guardas del mástil y obligó a tirar la lona de la carpa y por consecuencia a suspender la función.” AHDF- SDP- Vol. 812, File 1669, (1922).

\textsuperscript{185} Idem.
jacalones, for such a disorder would give a poor image of the Capitalino citizens. To illustrate this, I give a lengthy quote from a detailed report by inspector Hipólito Amor. His description helps in picturing the typical build of these theaters, while it also signals the inspector’s fears about the disorder that could arise in case of rain.

As a result of the commission that I have been assigned, to inspect the compliance with the Regulation of Public Entertainment in the spectacles in this city, I am honored to report that in the past day I have paid new visits to the following carpas: Jesús Torres, Minerva, India Bonita, María Conesa and Cardenti. All of them use a similar system, which is, they are all covered with tent ceiling, in very bad shape in all cases, with the exception of the first one [Jesús Torres], where the tent has been replaced which they are replacing. Due to the bad conditions of these tents they cannot be stretched tight and when it rains [the rain] generally comes through, and the audience has to change places to find a space where the rain does not come through. The stage is normally in worse condition than the rest, and there are some [theaters] where the wind has blown [the tents] away and the stage is entirely in the open air. The canvas that forms, so to say, the walls of the theaters, is in some cases better than in others, but in none of them is it entirely satisfactory. For what concerns paving, some of them have in the house section a wood platform, in more or less bad shape, but which gives much more space and comfort than where there is none. In the carpas where there is a wood platform in the house section, the chairs are fixed and the seat lines are properly arranged, but where [they use the] paving or cobbled street of the plazuela, the chairs are loose, and when it rains people in the audience take them to where they will not get wet, thus causing any order to disappear; and naturally not leaving any aisle available for transit, so that in their attempt to vacate the theater, a real chaos is produced. None of the carpas have proper dressing rooms for the artists that work there. They are not made with tongue and groove, [duela machibembrada] but with plain wood boards instead, which in the course of time crack open due to lack of paint, so that light and water come through everywhere. Since these venues have no more paving than the natural ground on which they are installed, it happens that in going to their dressing rooms, the workers and artists step in the water that has come through with the rain; and there are puddles everywhere. None of these carpas have fire extinguishers, nor any other mean to extinguish a fire should it arise, something which in any case is very likely to happen since there is nothing that is not combustible and electric installations are generally without a stall cabinet, but on a wood board more or less adapted. Neither are there toilets for the audience and for the actors in these theatres, save the carpa Jesús Torres which has a provisional toilet that does not have a water tank and is cleaned with buckets of water. Therefore, in short, it could be said that, with the exception of the carpa “JESUS TORRES” which has a new roof, a wood floor in the house section, and will soon install a broad aisle on stage, also made of wood, —agreeing besides to place fire extinguishers, install toilets for the audience, and improve the one there is for artists, for all of which a term can be established with which this Authority agrees — the rest of the carpas, in my opinion, are no longer in conditions to work, unless they are properly refurbished.186

---

186 *Como resultado de la comisión que se me tiene conferida para inspeccionar el cumplimiento del Reglamento de Diversiones en los espectáculos de la Ciudad, tengo la honra de informar que en estos últimos días he pasado nueva visita a las Carpas siguientes: Jesús Torres, Minerva, India Bonita, María Conesa, y Cardenti. Todas ellas están bajo un mismo sistema esto es compuestas de una cubierta de lona, en mal estado en todas ellas excepto en la primera que se está poniendo de nuevo. Esta cubierta debido a su mal estado no pueden restirarla bien y cuando llueve generalmente se pasa y el público tiene que estar cambiando de lugar para encontrar un sitio en donde no se pase el agua de la lluvia. La parte del escenario por lo regular está en peores condiciones que el resto habiendo algunas en que por el viento que sopla se ha desgarrado y se encuentra el foro por completo al aire libre. Las mantas que forman las paredes de la carpa en unas esta algo mejor que en las otras, pero en ninguna está en estado del todo satisfactorio. Por lo que hace a...*
The disastrous inner aspect of the carpa Bombay after a rain was captured in a photograph taken in 1952. Although the image dates from decades after the 1920s, its ruinous condition closely corresponds the description provided by inspector Amor for earlier jacalones. Anyone knowing the abrupt rain patterns of Mexico City, especially between the months of July and September, could imagine that the audience members of this carpa may have escaped the flood in a less than orderly manner.

Figure 2.6. Carpa Bombay flooded, Sistema Nacional de Fototecas, (SINAFO) No. 375395 (1952).
It is easy to understand why the rotten tents and the overall bad shape of some of these carpas caused concern for public safety among authorities. Similarly, one can see why they also caused aesthetic concerns. To combat the detrimental appearance of the carpas, inspector Hipólito Amor proposed to force carpa managers to acquire circus tents from the United States and use them “as models for this kind of business”, for he believed their tents were “much more suitable.”

[...] In consideration of the above, I find most appropriate the idea [...] of requesting a tent, of the best and most suitable [type], from the United States, which, conveniently established in some place of the Capital city [...] could serve as a model [...] thus [...] obliging everyone [to follow the model], and those who did not arrange their tents like the one installed, would not be allowed [to work].

Officer Amor was probably referring to a small number of commercially branded canvas tents specially designed for dramatic performances that were available in the US market as early as 1910, but which apparently were only extensively used in there after the 1920s. In Mexico, however, it was unlikely that these tents were available in the market; even if they were, their size would have far exceeded the needs of the small Mexican jacaletes. Unable to buy the branded tents, some company managers acquired new locally made ones, or made their own, as they thought the upgrading would increase their chances to perform. In their written exchanges with authorities,

187 “En vista pues de las anteriores consideraciones, me parece sumamente acertada la idea [...] para que se encargara una carpa de las mejores y más bien acondicionadas que se producen en los Estados Unidos y convenientemente establecida en algún sitio de la Capital, sirviera de modelo [...] pudiendo [...] obligar a todos, para que quien no pusiera su carpa como la que se tuviera instalada, no se le permitiría ”. Amor, Hipólito “Descripción y defensa de la existencia de las Carpas; propuesta de tomar una carpa de E.U. como modelo.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, File 1708, (1922).

188 The United States Tent and Awning Company in Chicago launched the first of these canvas tents, called “the Driver’s Improved Theatrical Tent,” in 1910 by. The second, seemingly with no different features, was a designed by Lou J. Palmer, and was thus called “The Palmer Stage Top”. However, due to their high price and their portability problems, these canvas tents were not popular even among American tent-show managers, who preferred to stick to their old-style canvas roofs with poles in the center. See William L. Slout, Theatre in a Tent, the Development of a Provincial Entertainment (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1972), 41-42.

189 In fact, inspector Felipe del Castillo gave precise specification on how to request tents from the USA by indicating “I make of your attentive knowledge that the address to send the catalogue of the tents for the US is the following: Av. Jangei 335 Broadway, NY, USA. This man will search for the business houses with the best tents, Felipe del Castillo, 1922.” (“Tengo en vuestro atento conocimiento que la dirección para que manden el catálogo para las carpas de los E.U es la siguiente: Av. Jangei 335 Broadway, NY, USA. Este señor buscará las casas que tengan las mejores carpas, Felipe del Castillo, 1922”). While there is no data in the AHDF that allows us to know if these tents were indeed bought, the sole reference to this address suggests a connection between the Mexican carpas and the US Tent shows that merits more scholarly attention. AHDF- SDP- Vol. 812, File, 1669.
many of these carpa managers argued in favor of the moral respectability of their repertories, as well as the comfort and hygiene that their theaters offered. In their requests, comparisons were often made with “the theatres of downtown”.

Alfredo Álvarez and José Herrera, in use of our right and with all due respect, state before Your Honor that: We have acquired a carpa in which to present diverse spectacles based upon an absolute morality, [which] tent we want to install in the Calzada de Guadalupe no. 101. In addition to the morality of the representations to which we have referred, this center of entertainment will offer the best conditions of comfort and hygiene, reason for which people attending it will enjoy advantages equal to those provided by theaters in the downtown, at popular prices.

Unknown to these petitioners was the fact that the main theaters in the downtown area faced similar, if not as severe, problems. Overlooking this, inspectors conscientiously protected the “look” of the central area by blaming the carpas for their tawdry appearance. A report on the carpa María Conesa illustrates some of the ways in which the appearance of the theaters was considered injurious for the city.

The carpa María Conesa is in very bad shape. The tent ceiling is ripped and the canvas is rotten […], although this carpa is located in a dirty barrio of the city, its bad appearance nevertheless emphasizes and speaks very ill of what these centers of entertainment should be.

Many carpa managers decided to move their jacalones away from the precious region in downtown, towards neighborhoods located to the East and North of the Zócalo where, they believed, the appearance of their theaters mattered less. This propelled the urban segregation process. Even though it was located relatively far from the downtown area, the carpa María Conesa seems to have

---

190 Alfredo Álvarez y José Herrera, Por nuestro propio derecho, ante usted con el debido respeto exponemos. Que hemos adquirido una carpa para representar en ella espectáculos diversos, bajo la base de una absoluta moralidad, carpa que deseamos instalar en la calzada de Guadalupe numero 101. Además de la moralidad de las representaciones a que nos referimos, ese centro de diversiones contará con las mejores condiciones de comodidad e higiene, por lo que las personas que acudan al mismo disfrutarán iguales ventajas a las que les proporciona un teatro del centro de la ciudad, a precios populares.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 821, (1921).

191 “La carpa "María Conesa" se encuentra en malas condiciones, pues su techo tiene grandes roturas y en lo general la lona está podrida, […] Aunque esta carpa está situada en un barrio sucio de la ciudad, su mal aspecto sin embargo resalta y desdice mucho de los que deben ser estos centros de diversiones.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1720, (1922).
been a source of conflict between inspectors and carpa-managers. Following charges made about the bad appearance of this carpa, the inspector writing this report requested its immediate closure:

[I]n view of the fact that this carpa is still functioning and its owners do not care to repair it, I request of the Authorities its immediate closure because, beside the fact that the audience that comes to this carpa suffers the consequences it is also an attack upon public ornament since rags of canvas can be seen everywhere (…) The carpa María Conesa shows indeed a disastrous condition, independently of the danger threatening the audiences.\(^{192}\)

The fact that his concern for the aspect of the carpas is placed side by side with his concern for the comfort of the audience suggests that, during these years, local authorities regarded public ornamentation and public safety as equally important.

Cross-connection between maps, records of fines, and a list of entertainment centers that inspectors presented to the Ayuntamiento office, confirms that the carpa María Conesa was located in the street of Bartolomé de las Casas, and that the “dirty barrio” this inspector refers to was no less than the barrio Tepito. Traditionally inhabited by indigenous populations, the barrio Tepito had suffered the authorities’ stigmatization since colonial times. Even today, it is still one of the most stigmatized barrios of the city. Concerning the enduring segregation of this barrio, Ernesto Aréchiga has explained that

Since colonial times, almost all indigenous barrios were formed by irregular sets of houses [caseríos] situated amongst pens and sties, crop fields, trenches and brickworks. Their special distribution contrasted with the orderly, ample and well-aligned streets in the center of the capital.\(^ {193}\)

\(^{192}\) “En vista de que la carpa María Conesa sigue trabajando y sus dueños no se preocupan por repararla, pido a ésa superioridad que sea clausurada inmediatamente porque aparte de que el público que concurre a dicha carpa sufre las consecuencias, es también un atentado para el ornamento público, puesto que se ven garras de lona por todas partes […] La Carpa María Conesa, efectivamente presenta un estado desastroso, independientemente del peligro que amenaza para el público.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, File 1720, (1922)

\(^{193}\) “Como sucedía desde la época colonial, casi todos los barrios indígenas formaban caseríos irregulares que se levantaban entre corrales, campos de cultivo, zanjas y ladrilleras. Su distribución especial contrastaba con el orden de calles anchas y bien delineadas del centro de la capital.” See Ernesto Aréchiga Córdoba, “La formación de un barrio marginal: Tepito entre 1868 y 1929” in Miradas Recurrentes… op. cit., 271-293, 276. This author offers a more thorough analysis in Tepito: del antiguo barrio de indios al arrabal, 1868-1929, historia de una urbanización inacabada (México: Ediciones Uníos, 2003).
The fact that this inspector calls this a “dirty” barrio without further specification, allows us to interpret the subjective components of the report, as well as its supposed objective claim. In the context of a fast-changing city, this inspector’s use of “dirty” could have been determined by changing views not only of cultures of hygiene, but also of what at the time was considered legitimately urban. Inferring from Aréchiga’s description, a possibility is that the peripheral location of Tepito with respect to the central area allowed people living at this northern barrio to preserve cultural practices associated with notions of the rural, such as raising farm animals on their property or growing small domestic milpas. However, the reason this officer was so concerned about the ragged aspect of this carpa in a barrio that was already marginalized is still unclear. As I will explain later, the suspicion that this carpa offered nude shows may have been behind the numerous objections to its existence. But given the general concern about the city’s image, charges about its outer aspect and hygiene served to call official attention to this venue and justify its closure. On October 2nd, 1922, the Carpa María Conesa was closed down and its owner notified that within a week he had to let the artists know, “so that they could normalize their contracts.” Interestingly, in this notification the officer indicates that the cause for closure is “the disastrous state of the carpa, independently of the damage it caused to audiences.”

194 “Milpa” is the term used in Mexico for small-scale agricultural system used throughout Mesoamerica to grow corn, beans and squash in the same plot. Because the concept of the milpa is a sociocultural construct rather than simply a system of agriculture, it entails a variety of religious and symbolic meanings that have proven to be very resistant to cultural change.

195 “el estado desastrozo de la carpa, independientemente del daño que causa al público.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, File 1720, Foja 7 (1922).
The Cultural Hierarchies of Musical Theater: the Revolution of the Género Ínfimo and the Psicalipsis

If the appearance of the carpa theaters was important in determining their geographic distribution in the city, the prestige granted to different music practices and the subsequent associations with ideas of “the civilized” were also crucial in determining which companies were to move to the outskirts of what at the time counted as the city. During the Porfirian years, music making was organized into a stratified system of cultural value whereby musical practices associated with European civilization were at the top of the hierarchy. Concordantly, the allocation of space for musical theater played a significant role in shaping the symbolic and physical spaces that different people occupied. During both the period known as the Restored Republic (1867-1876) and the early Porfirian regime (1877-1900), opera was at the top position, being performed in the biggest and most prestigious theaters downtown. Towards the end of the century, the zarzuela, sung in Spanish, gained uncontestable popularity in Mexico and other Latin American countries; and although it did not gain the same cultural distinction as opera, it was placed almost next to it in appreciation and public acclaim. Performed in official theaters, the zarzuela became one of the most important forms of musical entertainment in turn of the century Mexico. In the later part of the nineteenth century, the modality of selling theater by the hour, originated in Madrid and exported to other Hispanic countries, had significant effects in the popularization of musical theater.


197 At this moment in time the Spanish empire had lost its most important and lucrative colonies, causing a severe decline in the international appreciation of its culture as well as severe criticism to its economic model of colonial exploitation. On the other hand, the imperialist expansion of Central-European countries such as France, Germany and England was in its apogee. Inspired by Illuminist values, the territorial, cultural and economic expansion of these European empires was sustained by the ideology of progress and civilization. As a result, the cultural production of Spain and Portugal were gradually marginalized with respect to those of central European countries. This affected not only how the musical legacy of these two countries and their colonies were internationally appraised, but also how their cultural heritage began to be historicized.
in formal venues. The new tandas gave greater revenues to formal theater managers and attracted a different kind of audiences, who could now pay to enjoy the theater experience for only one hour instead of five. What is more, because in the zarzuela de género chico a whole story had to be told in only one act, the topics became lighter and more accessible to audiences who were not so fond of the long and often convoluted classical plots of the opera. And although the zarzuela de género grande was first in accomplishing the transition from the heroic-tragic model of the opera to simpler, shorter and oftentimes comedic plots, this did not preclude the existence of dramatic plots in both género grande and género chico. In fact, the surviving registers of both carpa theaters as well as formal theaters demonstrates that genero chico included as many comedic pieces as there were dramas.

An even shorter form of musical theater considered less moral, less prestigious and symbolically placed below the género chico was the “género ínfimo,” which can be translated to English as the “negligible” or “insignificant” genre. The género ínfimo usually consisted of only one cuplé number excerpted from a zarzuela (either from the big or the small genre). It was very brief in duration, and yet its brevity contrasted inversely with its growing fame.198 Due to its brevity, its mundane topics, and the influence of black musics from the United States, the genre became also known by the nickname “teatro frivolo” (“frivolous theater”). However it was the term “género ínfimo” that unequivocally served to signal the decadence and debauchery of the end of the century. The name of the genre was originally taken from the title of a work by Joaquin Valverde and Tomás Barrera, premiered in Madrid in 1901, that made a sarcastic jibe at the disdain with which educated

198 The term was later used by general audiences in Spain to refer to one-act satires of equally short length when compared respectively with the géneros grande and chico. Emilio Casares Rodicio, Historia gráfica de la zarzuela : músicas para ver. (Madrid: Instituto Complutense de Ciencias Musicales, 1999), 107. But as Serge Salaün has explained, the pejorative connotation of the term came as a result of value judgments that associated duration with quality. In his own words: “The expression “género ínfimo”, an undisputed finding, is a falsity from the start, since it uses the notion of the “género chico” and transforms it by granting the adjective a negative value that it did not have originally (where it was opposed to “big” and not to “good”, thus indicating duration and not quality.” Serge Salaün, El cuplé (1900-1936) (Colección Austral: Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1990), 148.
music critics in Spain received such stylistic transformations. In Mexico too, music critics showed their dismay for this genre, and lamented what they called “the degeneration of the zarzuela.”

The “degeneration” ascribed to this genre came hand in hand with the protagonic role women acquired through its musico-dancistic practices, as the género ínfimo was typically performed by voluptuous young women. The exhibition of female bodies became a feature of the *psicalipsis* or *espectáculo sicalíptico*, an erotic version of género ínfimo known for the distinctive, piquant lyrics of its cuplés. This sub-genre caused state officers to manifest great concern for the protection of the morality and minds of theater-goers. In 1902, for instance, Mr. Ramírez de Arellano a councilor of Public Entertainment had discussed in a meeting at the Ayuntamiento office that in some theaters of the capital city, “one could hear indecent words every night and see images that were too realistic; and that a notable actress presenting in Italian, enacted scenes only seen in brothels.” The discussion does not include any specification of the repertory, nor of what this officer could have meant by “realistic.” However, we might imagine it to be connected to the attire singers wore on stage. Since these performers wore full-body, skin-color, tight leotards that revealed their curves, these shows were often said to be “pornographic.” The truth is that nudity was rarely shown – if not entirely absent – in formal theatres.

A councilor named Escalante participating in the same meeting proposed that, whether they entailed nudity or not, “representations whose morality was dubious, should have a sign that

---

199 The género chico zarzuela titled *Género Ínfimo* (also referred to as “pasillo”) depicted a caricatured view of the variety salons that were very popular in Madrid at the end of the nineteenth century, and in which cuples were the main musical attraction. See Ignacio Jassa Haro and Enrique Mejías García, “Género Ínfimo: Un Arte de ser bribones,” in *Las bribonas / La revoltosa*, libro-programa (Madrid, Teatro de la Zarzuela-INAEM, 2007).


201 “[E]n otros teatros de la capital se oían noche a noche palabras indecentes y se veían escenas demasiado realistas; que una notable actriz que representaba en Italiano, presentaba escenas que sólo se veían en los burdeles.” Memorias del Ayuntamiento, 1901, “Diversiones Públicas”, 481.
announced them as ‘for men only’,” and that access to underage boys should be denied. Furthermore, he said that these shows “should be established in more appropriate places, and preferably in inner patios [corrales] or private grounds.” Needless to say, these shows were restricted to the latest hours of the night. Although Escalante’s proposal was not approved by the Ayuntamiento, the fact that the officers of the Public Entertainment Office were invested in the authorization of these kind of shows suggests not only their interest for the potential financial gains these spectacles could generate in the form of taxation and fines, but also indicates a social pressure in favor of moral relaxation that was already undeniable at the end of the Porfirian regimen, even among state officers.

After the turn of the century, some carpa managers tried to convince inspectors to allow the erotic shows by arguing that their licentiousness gave the city a more cosmopolitan appeal. Catching on to the aspiration of authorities to make Mexico City a metropolis of international acclaim, their requests stated that these shows “were a result of the progress of civilization,” or that they would “elevate the city to the standards of Berlin, Vienna, New York, Paris, and other cities in Europe and North America.” The following request, presented in 1901, is a case in point.

*Existing in all the great capital cities in Europe and North America*, there are theaters with plays that are abundant in ‘calembourgs’ and malicious interpretations. These being the places where men [who do

---

202 “Debían establecerse en sitios más adecuados y mejor en corrales o terrenos de propiedad particular.” At the time, the term corrales was used to refer to the central patios of an apartment block. In the Mexican context, this probably meant the patios of vecindades, of which there were many in downtown and the surrounding barrios. Memorias del Ayuntamiento 1901, “Diversiones Públicas”, 482.

203 The appeal of eroticized musical shows and the craze for other musical genres that later became to be known as “popular music” came in the context of a larger chiasm between music for commercial purposes and that considered “art music” that happened in the nineteenth century. Derek Scott has termed this chiasm as the “Revolution of Popular Music.” He has argued that such revolution was driven by social changes such as the incorporation of music into a system of capitalist enterprise that was in turn closely associated with ideas of cosmopolitanism in cities such as London, New York and Vienna. Since the Mexican model of urban progress was inspired by European metropolitan centers, it is easy to understand that these ideas were also instilled in Mexico City. See Derek Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: the Nineteenth-century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
not go] to bars and taverns [garitos], find a frank distraction; [I] do not think that there is any inconvenience in establishing in this capital city a spectacle analogous to those. 204 [Italics are mine].

And while these requests were not authorized, social pressures in favor of the existence of a more licentious music repertory and performing style, offered both in theaters and jacalones, spoke of the imminent demise of the stagnant Porfrian Belle Époque. Despite explicit official prohibitions, the erotic shows continued, and became even more popular as the century advanced. And while the intention was to restrict them to hidden places, far from the central area, the entrenchment of the géneros chico and ínfimo among the Capitalino audience was already out of official control. As a result, during the first decade of the twentieth century, both género chico and género ínfimo were cultivated in many formal theaters downtown, and most saliently the Teatro Principal which became to be popularly known as “The capital of the tanda.” Unsurprisingly, it was the género chico – and particularly its erotic variant género psicalíptico – which provoked the memorable scandals among audiences, as well as resentful reviews from the most conservative sectors.

At this time, it was clear that the musical repertory in formal theaters made its way to the informal jacalón circuit simply because the demand for certain forms of musical theater far surpassed the physical capacity of formal theaters, as well as the budget of most people in the audience. Because the género chico was clearly more suitable for the small jacalones, carpa managers profited greatly from its shorter duration, with the added advantage that each tanda could also be combined with previously performed variety acts.

The indignant critiques left behind by influential writer and theater critic Luis G. Urbina exemplify the most radical reactions against the género chico. His publications help explain the

204 “Existiendo en todas las grandes capitales y centros de población europeas y norteamericanas, teatros donde son representadas obras que abundan en ‘calembourgs’ [sic] y maliciosas interpretaciones, siendo el lugar de los hombres que a]jenos a las cantinas y garitos encuentran en esos lugares una distracción franca; no cree que el que esto suscribe haya inconveniente alguno en establecer en esta capital un espectáculo análogo a aquellos.” The French term “calembour” refers to a pun very much used in French chansonniers of the early 20th century, whereby humor allowed an ironic approach to given off-limits topics. Commonly, the understanding of a calembour relies on performative aspects such as intonation, gesture, and the use of the body on stage. AHDF-SDP, Vol. 806, File 1126, (1901).
gradual displacement of this musical genre to venues of questionable reputation located in marginal neighborhoods.

You tell me that owners [of theaters] legally manage a business; it is true, but let us note how, night after night, owner and artists, business men and comedians, forced to please the monster, have to violate the Regulation of Theaters, the defendant of a public morality that does not exist, but which must exist for the authorities and the law. The assignation houses (casas de asignación) have been removed from the center of the city, they are moved further away each day, they are confined to a determined area; the género chico of this type, the género chico in which La Conesa shines, is also a prostitution, and it should not live in the heart of the city as the preferred, and often unique, musical genre. When a seller repeatedly adulates his merchandise, the Council of Sanitation closes down his business: it is a measure necessary for public health. The pornographic género chico is poisoning morality and the [sense of] taste, it is threatening the soul of a vast social group.\(^{205}\)

Urbina’s anxieties about prostitution are not casual, and his comparison between this form of sexual commerce and the selling of género chico is not disinterested. As he indicates, the género of ‘this type’ and in which María Conesa shines” was the género psicalíptico, hence his view of it as “pornographic.”\(^{206}\) Deliberately, he reminds his readers that the “casas de asignación” – an euphemism for brothels run by matronas (female pimps) and where prostitutes offered their services but in which they did not live – had been removed from the center of the city as part of the Porfirian measures of sanitation and public health. Urbina’s argument that the selling of something as profitable as the género chico is a form of prostitution is not only a simple analogy but also, as he clearly states, a

\(^{205}\) “Se me dirá que los dueños explotan legalmente un negocio; es verdad, pero notemos cómo noche por noche, obligados empresarios y artistas, forzados negociantes y cómicos a dar gusto al monstruo, tienen que violar el Reglamento de Teatros, defensor de una moralidad pública que no existe, pero que debe existir para la ley y para la autoridad. Las casas de asignación se han alejado del centro de la ciudad, se las retira cada día más, se las confina a una zona determinada; el género chico de este jaez, el género chico en que brilla la Conesa, es una prostitución también y que no debe vivir en el corazón de la ciudad como género preferido y muchas veces único. El Consejo de Salubridad cuando reincide un comerciante en adulterar sus mercancías, le clausura el establecimiento: es una medida necesaria para la salud pública. El género chico pornográfico está envenenando la moralidad y el gusto, está amenazando el alma de un numerosísimo grupo social.” Luis G. Urbina, El Imparcial (November 22\(^{nd}\), 1907), in Reyes de la Maza, 365.

\(^{206}\) Urbina talks about La Conesa, which is to say, the actress María Conesa, perhaps the most famous diva of género chico during the first decade of the twentieth century, years when she habitually performed in Mexico City while also touring other capital cities of Latin America. For an additional example of the most radical reactions of Luis G. Urbina to María Conesa’s show in El Imparcial, 27 de Noviembre, 1907, in Reyes de la Maza, 369. As I have shown, in the decade of the 1920s, a carpa was opened in the barrio Tepito bearing the diva’s name. However, I have not been able to find any information indicating whether or not the famous singer was involved in this carpas as an owner or producer, or if the name of the carpa was only honorific.
supporting argument to his demand that these musical shows too be segregated from the central theaters.

Katherine Elaine Bliss has defended that during the first decade of the twentieth century, the practice of sexual commerce increased in Mexico City as a result of the material hardships that the liberal economic system imposed unto the less privileged sectors of the urban populace. She also explained that the segregation of brothels to the barrios had caused prostitution to be perceived as characteristic of the lifestyles of these poorer neighborhoods. She then concludes that, in that context, sexual behavior could be a marker of social class” which illustrates in turn that “the Porfirian ideals of rationality, order and progress were consistently undermined by popular conceptualizations about honor and status.”

Clearly, Urbina’s interest is to preserve the social distinction of the formal theaters and their audiences by securing a musical repertory that, if not lucrative, does not “poison the souls of a vast social group.” It is unclear to me, whether or not Urbina thought of this vast group to be the elites or simply the numerous audiences attending the main theaters of the City. However, his dictum that the género chico had to be segregated to “determined areas” – one can infer, the poor barrios and where its poison did not mattered – is most transparent.

Urbina was not alone in inveighing against the género psicalíptico. In 1910, at the outbreak of the Revolution, a music critic writing under the pseudonym “Conde de Armería” described the teatro frívolo as monotonous, absurd and shameful. He complained bitterly about the zarzuela companies’ stagnation, and lamented the replacement of the zarzuela by something so lacking in artistic value as was the psicalipsis. Opposing the views that the género chico was a sign of

---

207 Katherine Elaine Bliss, 27.

208 Conde de Armería, "La zarzuela va de capa caída," Revista de Revistas (January 30th 1910); (Anónimo) "La vergüenza de nuestro teatro frívolo," Revista de Revistas (May, 13th, 1928).
ideological progress, his review discloses his fear that the lack of culture of the Capitalino people, as demonstrated by their penchant for these light-hearted spectacles, compromised the progressiveness and prestige of Mexico City.

Let us leave to its enemies who trill against the famous genre [the género psicalíptico] and its pornographic abuses; that is a different matter. What it is important to us is the fact, significant, strange and astonishing in itself: our admired city, our progressive Mexico, the capital of our Republic, cannot sustain a company that offers entertainment to the cultural standards we pretend to have. Among so much psicalipsis, among so much tango and so many leotards more or less stuffed with cotton; among so many cuplé and so many puerile jokes, there is not a single little hole where a little art can very humbly find refuge. This has no remedy. A social transformation does not happen just like that. We need injections of culture. Meanwhile we have to come to terms with the art we are capable of sustaining. The art we deserve.209 [Italics are mine].

“Conde de Armería” shows great confidence about distinguishing between true art and the puerile jokes that were distinctive of the género chico. He therefore felt entitled to prescribe “injections of culture” in order to counteract the corrupt entertainment that, in his view, undermined the advance of the city. Such self-assurance is characteristic of the social groups that Ángel Rama has called the letrados (‘literati,’) of the city. Later in this chapter I discuss the role these “letrados” played in the making of Mexico City’s public policies in the early twentieth century. For now, let it suffice to point out how ideas of progress in those years were by no means consistent, but rather contingent on different political and ideological orientations. Most interesting, at least from a musicological point of view, is how the variety of musical genres performed in the jacalones played a part in the debate.

Without a doubt, the sense of decay associated with the género chico and the ill repute of the género infimo were both determinant in the stigma attached to the carpas shows. But, paradoxically,

---

209 “Dejamos a sus enemigos que trinen contra el género famoso [el género chico] y sus demásias pornográficas; que eso es harina de otro costal. Lo que nos importa es el hecho en sí, significativo, extraño, inaudito: nuestra admirada ciudad, nuestro progresivo México, la capital de nuestra República no puede sostener una compañía que nos ofrezca espectáculos dignos de la cultura que pretendemos tener. Entre tanta “sicalipsis”, entre tanto tango y tantas mallas más o menos rellenas de algodón; entre tanto cuplé y tanto chiste verde, no queda ni un huequito en dónde se refugie muy modestamente, muy humildemente, un poquito de arte. Y no tiene remedio. Una transformación social no se opera así como así. Necesitamos inyecciones de cultura. Entre tanto habrá que resignarse al arte que somos capaces de sostener. Al arte que merecemos.” Conde de Armería, “Crónicas teatrales” in Revista de Revistas, (April 3rd, 1910): 5.
if negative prejudice against the supposed “immoral nature” of the carpas audiences was intrinsically and unquestionably linked to their social class, these musical shows also contributed positively to the international image of Mexico. As a result, the jacalones worked as a shelter that provided greater freedom of action, for actors on stage as well as for those among the audience. The carpas therefore became spaces of greater tolerance. Their relative liberality not only opened an escape valve from the moral constrictions of previous years, it also contributed to pave the way to social ambiance of the Revolution.

The declining appreciation for decorum in Mexico was not exclusively a local phenomenon, but part of a global crisis of morality following World War I and the Russian Revolution. In this context, the Mexican attraction to the musical scenes of European metropolises was not casual. The Berlin Cabaret, the Parisian café concert and the Madrilenian music hall were all manifestations of a *fin-de-siècle* disillusionment with conventional morality in which Mexico participated, albeit for reasons of its own.

The spread of communist ideals preceding the triumph of the Bolshevik party in Moscow in 1917 was also consequential in Mexico, opening both political and ideological alternatives to Díaz’ liberal model. These ideas ended up being highly influential in the writing of the new Mexican Constitution in 1917. Furthermore, the anticlericalism characteristic of post-revolutionary leaders, such as Plutarco Elías Calles, whose mandate lasted from 1924-28, translated as a clear disdain for all things that resembled ideas of sin or moral guilt. From this it followed that the emerging intellectuals and policymakers considered that any alternative to the naïve innocence and the constrictive morals of the nineteenth century was an ideological advance.

During and after the Revolution, the carpa shows had unparalleled freedom to perform musical theater acts that would have been inconceivable under Porfrian surveillance. Because the new revolutionary leaders wanted a new political beginning through a clear ideological break with
the old regime, the negative valorization of the género ínfimo was reversed, and it was promoted by
carpa managers as a cultural asset that gave the city a more progressive appeal. The following
request, presented to the Office of Public Entertainment in 1914 illustrates this clearly:

_The growing advances of civilization go hand in hand with the need to have spectacles of this genre, and their existence and development should not seem strange to us, as long as its regulation is enforced prudently and appropriately […]_ The spectacles of tolerance, which we might call free, could serve as a valve to regulate passions, and it could not be otherwise if it is considered that, by limiting attendance to these shows only to men, lewd films and nude dances, the piquant and picaresque cuplé, the insinuating vaudeville, the provoking grin, could all equally be shown on stage. To have this, it will be enough to prescribe certain conditions, for example women and minors of both sexes should absolutely abstain from attending these shows, _performance in central theaters_ [should be forbidden] and, additionally, that these shows [should] take place at advanced hours [at night], perhaps from 10 pm; everything on the understanding that severe punishments will be applied in cases of infringement._210 [Italics are mine]

When considering that this petition was registered at a moment when the political angst
caused by the Revolution was practically at its worst, the argument that these shows fulfilled an
important social function as a sort of pressure valve was particularly persuasive. It is also noteworthy
that the petitioner himself stated the terms of restrictions, and that he was willing to pay fines in
cases of infringement.

There is a further interesting aspect of the gradual acceptance of comic and erotic theater in
the jacalones. If the vivid scene of the géneros chico and ínfimo in formal theaters met with the
contempt of champions of morality such as Urbina and Armería, in the carpa theaters, the supposed
moral laxity of the audiences made it seem as if the lecherous dance-shows had found their “natural
home.” Even if both circuits had almost the same repertory, in one of them the presence of such
lasciviousness seemed outrageous and illegitimate, while in the other it was only expected. Such

210 “El creciente adelanto de la civilización trae aparejada la necesidad de espectáculos de este género y nada extraño debe parecernos su existencia y desarrollo, pero si se impone su reglamentación prudente y adecuada […] Los espectáculos de tolerancia que podríamos llamar libres, podrían representar la válvula reguladora de las pasiones, y no podrá ser de otra manera si se atiende a que limitando la asistencia a estos teatros solo para hombres, se podrá llevar al escenario lo mismo la película procaz que el baile al desnudo, el cuplé sic picante y picaresco, el vaudeville insinuante, la mueca intencionada y para esto será suficiente prescribir determinadas condiciones como por ejemplo abstinencia absoluta de concurrencia señoras y menores de ambos sexos, exhibiciones en teatros céntricos, y además que estas representaciones sean a horas avanzadas, suponiendo las 10pm. En adelante; todo bajo el concepto de establecer severas penas para las infracciones.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 807, File 1351, (1914).
notions of a differential morality along repertorial lines contributed to new ways of conceiving the geographical boundaries of decency and class. As a result, musical shows considered “too dissolute” were allocated to the smaller theaters, and these, in turn, to the outskirts of the downtown area.

To an important extent, it is the género ínfimo that can be held accountable for the geographical displacement of the carpas shows to those areas pejoratively called “barrios.” The following press note illustrates this:

This has been one of the fundamental causes of the decay of the género chico in Mexico, which can be verified as certain authors some Mexican, some Spaniards, who live in the capital city, contribute actively to discrediting even more the beleaguered genre. There are zarzuelas, performed in the teatros de barrio, that are a complete indecency from beginning to end. There is no common sense in them, much less inventiveness; there is solely great shamelessness paired with a nameless audacity.211

In this conflictive context, it comes as no surprise that Officers of Public Entertainment accepted the género ínfimo and the psicalípsis or espectáculo psicalíptico at the carpas with unprecedented leniency during the decade of the 1920, always ensuring a strict control to prevent the attendance of women and adolescent boys.212 While there are no records at the Ayuntamiento archive to demonstrate that requests to perform these shows were ever authorized, neither are there registers demonstrating that they were penalized. As the Ayuntamiento records reveal, carpa theaters that offered this sort of “indecent” entertainment were called “tolerance theaters” (teatros de tolerancia) or “Theaters for men only” (teatros para hombres solos).

Something I find particularly significant is that carpa managers seem to have internalized the official temporal and spatial boundaries of morality; they not only agreed to limit their performances

211 “Ha sido esta una de las causas fundamentales del decaimiento del género chico en México, haciendo constar que ciertos autores mexicanos unos, españoles otros, que residen en la capital, cooperan activamente para desprestigiar más aún el asenderado [sic] género. Zarzuelas hay, que se representan en los teatros de barrio, que son una completa indecencia desde el principio hasta el fin. En ellas no hay sentido común, mucho menos ingenio; hay solamente una gran desvergüenza adunada a una audacia sin nombre.” Revista de Revistas, (March 26, 1911): 8.

to night-time, but also agreed to be closely supervised and to settle their theaters far from
downtown, where they would not “harm anybody’s feelings.”

The undersigned, with address located at number 13, República del Salvador, respectfully states: that, wishing to install in México a spectacle with the same standards of those in Berlin, Vienna, New York, Paris, Havana etc, or in other words, a free theater and movie theater, he wishes that permission be given him to do so. But, since some prudish people would consider themselves wronged, considering the spectacle a little immoral - even though there are shows that are comparable to these in other countries, with the name ‘shows for single men,’ and [some] currently exist downtown- I promise to settle it in a distant place where it will not harm anybody’s feelings.  

The cases above exemplify that although the new post-revolutionary government tried to
distance itself from Porfirian politics by adopting less constricted moral views, ideas of the “morally
correct”, however ambiguous they were, remained established among the authorities and the society
at large, and even among the carpa managers themselves. Official policies for the regulation of
public entertainment thus ended up with devious ambiguities or clear contradictions, as conservative
ideas still impinged upon Revolutionary ideals about what counted as legitimate musical
entertainment and what were the legitimate spaces in which to perform it.

“The crusaders of beauty”: The creation of the Council of Arts and Culture

The radical shift that social life underwent after the Revolution complicated interclass
relationships in unexpected and often complex ways. These obscure the even more multifarious
ways in which ethnic, racial, cultural and class-based discrimination took place. Although the
Constitution of 1917 claimed to ensure better conditions for social equality, the binaries of the

213 “El suscrito, con domicilio en el número 13 de la República del Salvador, ante Ud. respetuosamente comparece
exponiendo: que deseando implantar en México un espectáculo a la altura de los de Berlín, Viena, Paris, New York,
Habana, etc. o lo que es lo mismo, un teatro y cine libres, desea se le conceda permiso para esto: pero como quiera que
algunas personas timoratas se podían llamar a perjudicadas por considerar el espectáculo un poco inmoral, aun cuando
hoy existen espectáculos que no tienen nada que desear a los establecidos en otros países con el nombre de Teatros para
Hombres solos’, y que actualmente existen en el centro de la ciudad, se compromete a ponerlo en un lugar lejano y
donde no pueda herir los sentimientos de nadie.” Italics are mine. AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1752-1, (1921).
“civilized/barbaric” or of the “progressive/backward,” which had tacitly mediated social life since the colonial period, were not entirely eradicated.214

Since the participation of peasants and workers in the Revolution had been decisive, the new government considered it pertinent to attend to the needs of the popular sectors. This made the government to not only activate political reforms that favored peasants and urban workers, such as the Agrarian Reform or the creation of the Casa del Obrero Mundial (House of the World Worker) -- both of which were undertaken in 1912 -- but also to incorporate more inclusive public policies concerning the use of public space in the city. The new measures met with the resistance of the elites, especially the Porfirian bourgeoisie, which would not so easily relinquish the privileges it once enjoyed.

Such struggle is exemplified by the argument between councilor Reyes and the director of Public Entertainment, Mr. Miguel y Rama, concerning the former’s petition to revoke the permission for dances in halls and public sites. Reyes’ request, inspired by his suspicion of the presence of prostitutes in public dances, received the following response:

Public dance balls have as their prime goal the solace and the distraction of a certain class of our people (pueblo) that, given their economic and social condition, do not have the possibility of enjoying this kind of entertainment in the private and family-oriented ways customary for the superior classes of the city. The isolation generally lived by our pueblo, its lack of sociability and the scarcity of their material means, are the principal factors that prevent their gathering, as would be expected, to enjoy an entertainment that would certainly direct them away from places that cause them great evil and are the origin of fights, drunkenness and other excesses. The public dance ball remedies these ills considerably, it is a center of diversion within reach of the most humble fortunes, an excuse to gather, and a mode of entertainment for those who cannot find it in the narrowness of their homes, nor in the society they frequent. This has been understood, let us say, in all other countries, and the public dance is a popular celebration, an amusement that enjoys prestige, and in some countries, almost a public need. If we take away from our pueblo, so lacking in diversions, an amusement that is so pleasant for them, under the excuse of the attendance of inconvenient people; another day we will ask that theaters be closed, that the Chapultepec or San Francisco promenades be suppressed, because women of bad reputation frequent them or because a moral fault may be committed. No, the remedy consists in having the police attend these places, and through an efficient surveillance, impede offenses to morality and prevent the public scandals about which the petitioner complains. If honorable people, as my

illustrious colleague proposes in his initiative, ‘attend in order to distract their hours off, with the belief that these dances are honorable,’ it will be their fault for not having taken due precautions for [not having gotten] the information that prudence advises.  

While Miguel y Rama patronizingly defends the right of the people [el pueblo] to use public spaces, he does it by perpetuating the deeply ingrained prejudice against the supposedly lower classes. Not without hinting at some disdain for the prudishness of the former bourgeois society, Miguel y Rama implies that people of the “pueblo” are prone to be drunken and combative, opposing these attributes to those of the “superior classes.” In this way he justifies the need for surveillance and control, to avoid fights and “moral offenses.” But there is something different in his approach: by allowing “honest people” (in this case, one can infer, the complainant) to decide what to watch and where to attend, instead of banning public events and spectacles altogether on the grounds of their immorality, Miguel y Rama evinces a tendency among the post-revolutionary government officers who aligned with a liberal ideology, more concordant with what modern, post-revolutionary Mexico was supposed to be.

But even if a more indulgent morality gave the city a more progressive appeal, the old bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century deeply resented the changes.  

---

215 “Los bailes públicos tienen por principal objeto, el solaz y la distracción de cierta clase de nuestro pueblo, que por sus condiciones económicas y sociales no está en la posibilidad de disfrutar de esta clase de diversiones en la forma privada y familiar que acostumbran las clases superiores de la ciudad. El aislamiento que generalmente vive nuestro pueblo, su falta de sociabilidad y la exigüidad de los medios de que dispone, son los principales factores para que no se reúnan, como sería de esperarse, para disfrutar de una diversión que seguro los alejaría de lugares que les causen grandes males y son orígenes de riñas, embriaguez y otros excesos. El baile público remedia en gran parte esos males, es un centro de diversión al alcance de las fortunas más humildes, un pretexto para reunirse y un motivo de distracción para los que no la encuentran en la estrechez de su hogar, ni en la sociedad que frecuentan. Así se ha entendido en la, podemos decir, totalidad de los países, y el baile público es una fiesta popular, una diversión que goza de prestigio y en algunos países casi una necesidad pública. Si quitamos a nuestro pueblo, tan escaso de distracciones, una diversión que le es tan grata con el pretexto de que a ella acude gente inconveniente; otro día cualquiera pediremos que se clausuren los teatros, que se suprima el paseo de Chapultepec o San Francisco porque a ellos asisten mujeres de mala nota y porque se cometa alguna falta a la moral pública. No, el remedio consiste en que la policía acuda a esos lugares, y con una vigilancia eficaz, impida que se ofenda la moral y evita que se cometan los escándalos de que se queja el proponente. Si la gente honrada como dice mi ilustrado compañero en su iniciativa, “concurre a distraer las horas de descanso en la creencia de que dichos bailes son honrados”, culpa será de los que no toman las precauciones debidas y los informes que la prudencia aconseja.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 807, File.1333, (1912).
Mexico City by the elite and governing classes was still based as much on its architectural grandeur as on its capability to demonstrate the culture of its inhabitants, so the struggle for public space and the activities performed in it was an ongoing battle. Clinging on to their old privilege of deciding what counted as legitimate culture, the elites began to connect ideas of “progress” – formerly associated with hygiene, morality and cosmopolitanism – to artistic value and distinction. Therefore, greater exposure to popular taste in music and theater awoke elites’ anxieties over what they considered the vulgarization of culture. Similarly, the elites feared that the urban spaces they had so conscientiously prepared to welcome the new century had become, all of a sudden, spaces to be used by practically anyone. These were all preoccupations that incited them to intervene in what they characterized as safeguarding “the cultural heritage of the city.”

Perhaps nothing illustrates the elite concern better than the creation of the Inspección Cultural y Artística (Inspection of Arts and Culture) In 1920, the first year of Alvaro Obregón’s brief presidency (1920-24), Miguel Alonzo Romero, Mexico city’s mayor, and Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, concocted this council, whose members were said to be “the most apt and highly educated intellectuals, working for the benefit of urban culture.”

According to the original proposition presented by Lerdo de Tejada in 1921, this organization should safeguard the quality of artistic spectacles offered in the city because, in his view, the inspectors of Public Entertainment currently

---

216 An example of the elites’ dissatisfaction is illustrated by the case of a journalist writing in the 1920s with the pseudonym “El fontanero de la ciudad” (The city plumber), who bitterly complained that the Alameda had become “the cathedral of vagrancy”. As he alleged, the populist post-revolutionary government had allowed “anybody” to use the park. See “Jardines de México: Paraíso de la vagancia” in Revista de Revistas (October 19th, 1924).

217 Alonzo Romero’s report states that “The project of this council, which was initially called Inspection, was mainly due to the chief of the section of Public Entertainment, the well known artists Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. From the first moment, and due to my love for all things cultured and beautiful I understood the impending need to Foster the idea and make it happen as soon as possible for the sake of culture in the capital city which, frankly, is in very bad shape.” (“El proyecto de este Consejo, que en un principio se llamó Inspección Cultural Artística, se debió principalmente al jefe de la Sección de Diversiones, el conocido Artista Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. Desde el primer momento, por mi amor a todas las cosas cultas y bellas, comprendí la urgente necesidad de prohijar con todo empeño la idea, y llevarla a cabo lo más pronto posible para bien de la citadina cultura que, a decir verdad, anda por los suelos.”) See Alonzo Romero, Un año de sitio en a presidencia Municipal, 109.
in charge of supervising these activities were “incompetent to adequately judge their artistic merit.”

Lerdo de Tejada’s presentation of the organization reads as follows:

The INSPECTION OF CULTURE AND ART, whose creation I am honored to propose, would be the organism in charge of such an important task. There is currently a number of theater inspectors that, in my view, performs a job with no results, because neither their intellectual capacity, nor their artistic knowledge, nor even their simple appearance [presentación] are suited to perform such an important task as the one I am proposing. The pay that is daily assigned to these inspectors could be easily allocated to create a competent body (The INSPECTION OF CULTURE AND ART), made up of art critics, intellectuals, men of true efficiency and judgment, who could honorably represent the authority of the Municipality, and resolve the frequent and delicate cases that are daily presented in the theaters, seeking after their immediate and appropriate resolution. [Capitals in the original. Italics are mine]

By disqualifying the judgment of inspectors, Lerdo de Tejada contributes to the characterization of the elite circles of “letrados” as able to distinguish “artistic merit”, thus legitimizing their authority over the rest. As Ángel Rama has explained, in colonial times “the lettered city” was not only a physical space, but also a symbolic space where educated people reinforced their superior self-image vis-à-vis the cultures they deemed inferior.

To carry out the civilizing mission assigned to them, the cities of Latin America required a specialized social group. Like a priestly caste, this group had to be imbued with the consciousness of its lofty ministry. If it lacked access to the metaphysical absolutes of other priestly castes, this one at least enjoyed dominion over the subsidiary absolutes of the universe of signs, organized in the service of the monarchies beyond the sea. We will call this group “the lettered city.”

If by the early twentieth century monarchies were no longer a concern, the de facto postcolonial powers, represented by the local elites, occupied an analogous domineering position.

---

218 Idem.

219 “La INSPECCIÓN CULTURAL Y ARTÍSTICA cuya creación tengo el honor de proponer, sería la encargada de tan importante labor. Hay actualmente un creciente número de Inspectores teatrales que desempeña a mi juicio una labor de resultados nulos pues ni por su capacidad intelectual, ni por sus conocimientos artísticos, ni siquiera por su simple presentación, están capacitados para desempeñar una función tan delicada como la que vengo proponiendo. Podría dedicarse la cantidad que se paga diariamente a esos inspectores, en crear un cuerpo competente (INSPECCIÓN CULTURAL Y ARTÍSTICA) formada por críticos de arte, intelectuales, hombres de verdadera eficiencia y criterio que pudieran representar dignamente la autoridad del municipio, y resolver los constantes y delicados casos que diariamente se presentan en los teatros para su inmediata y [atinente] resolución.” Capitals in the original. Italics are mine. AHDF-SDP Vol. 808. File, 1411, (1921).

220 Angel Rama, The Lettered City, 16.
Months later, Lerdo de Tejada’s proposition was welcomed by the local government; and, in what was perhaps an attempt to make the new institution seem more amicable the name “Inspection” was changed to “Council.” The Consejo Cultural y Artístico (Council of Arts and Culture) was presented on February 25th, 1923 in an official event covered by the press. The following morning the newspaper El Nacional published a note proclaiming the organization’s “highly civilizing goals.”

During the event to officially present the Council, Miguel Alonzo Romero gave an opening speech whose archaic style should not pass unnoticed. Its initial words stated: “From now on, the Metropolitan city government (cabildo), over which I have the honor to preside, arms thee as crusaders of beauty. Thou shalt perfectly know thy way. Hereafter, thou shalt be responsible in a work of purification.” The anachronistic style of this speech discloses the long lasting traces of the colonial mentality. By entitling – or as Alonzo says, “arming” — the members of this council to be “cruzados de la belleza” [the crusaders of beauty] Alonzo evokes the medieval imaginaries of the Crusades that inspired the Spanish colonizing process in the sixteenth century.

Supporting Enrique Dussel’s idea of the “ego conquiro” – a form of subjectivity that is grounded on the certainty of the self as a conqueror – José Subirats has analyzed the chivalrous writing style adopted by the first Spanish conquero rs to talk about their victories in the Americas. According to Subirats, many of the conquerors’ writings – such as the Cartas de relación written by

---

221 “Ayer se efectuó la instalación solemne de la Inspección Cultural Artística, creada por el H. Ayuntamiento con los fines altamente civilizados de que oportunamente dimos cuenta al publicar el programa a que los trabajos de la mención de la inspección se circunscribirán.” El Nacional, (February 26th, 1923), quoted in Alonzo Romero, Un año de sitio en la presidencia municipal, 113.

222 “De hoy en adelante, el Cabildo metropolitano que me honro en presidir, os arma cruzados de la belleza. Vosotros conocéis perfectamente el camino, vosotros seréis de hoy en más, los responsables de una obra de purificación.” Alonzo Romero, Un año de sitio en la presidencia municipal, 115.

Hernán Cortés to Emperor Charles V (1519-1524), or the Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España, by missionary Bernal Díaz del Castillo (1632), were inspired by medieval pieces of epic literature like El cantar del mio Cid, the Najerense, or the Liber Regum. A full quotation of Alonzo’s speech further demonstrates the adoption of this medievalist style, and suggests that his fears of losing jurisdiction over downtown motivated his combative tone.

The legacies of the colonial period have been transformed into cafés, stores that sell cheap trifles, pleasant corners of foolishness and flirtation, where sparkling ladies with mascara-lined eyes cleanse the lewdness of fine fashionable boys [fifís]; those legacies are awaiting a pious hand to save them from these usurpers of art (…). In theater, aren’t we tolerating this impossible drivel [monsergas], those clumsy acrobatic acts, those parades of hysterical women in cheap make-up who exhibit their emaciated nudity to the rhythm of the same insipid music? Aren’t we tolerating that which is called our vernacular theater which, if anything, is our vernacular shame? What is the beauty entailed in those musical variety shows in which, to the rhythm of eternal Antillean rumbas, men and women exchange idiotic smiles while ridiculously contorting? Perhaps of our arts, music has been the least humiliated; maybe the most ennobled, in the hands of Ogazón, the Castillo Ponce, the Barajas etc. – and precisely so that the horrendous bicks of this century –those who eat enchiladas and drink pulque, right on in the beauty of our monuments— do not continue staining them with their intolerable presence, precisely so that the beautiful works that colonial architecture bequeathed to us will not be converted into bazaars of foolishness [bazares de necedad] and lust in silk gloves; precisely so that the torturing, monorrhythmic,” of those musical variety shows where the same politicians, the same police officers, the same danzones, and the same rumbas, parade, do not go on torturing us (…) precisely for this, we have summoned thee.\(^{224}\) [Italics are mine].

Alonzo manifests great preoccupation about the musical and social practices performed around the buildings he calls “the legacy of the colonial period.” Presumably, what is at stake in his

\(^{224}\) “Los legados de la época colonial, allí están convertidos en cafés, en expendios de baratijas, en amenos rincones de necedad y de flirt, donde las damiselas de ojos alborotados de rimel expían las concupiscencias de los jóvenes fifís; esos legados, ahi están esperando la mano piadosa que los salve de los detentadores del arte, (…). En el teatro, ¿no estamos tolerando todavía esas monsergas imposibles, esos actos de mal acrobatismo, ese torturante desfile de mujeres históricas y pintarrajeadas, que exhiben sus desnudeces famélicas al compás de las mismas soserías musicales? ¿No estamos tolerando eso que se llama nuestro teatro vernáculo y que, si acaso, es nuestra vernácula vergüenza? - Qué belleza encierran esas revistas en las que, al son de las eternas rumbas antillanas, los hombres y las mujeres cambian sonrisas idiotas, en medio de contorsiones ridicuласi¿-Quizá la música es de nuestras artes la menos pisoteadas; quizá la más ennoblecida en manos de los Ogazón, de los Castillo, de los Moctezuma, de los Carrillo, de los Ponce, de los Barajas, etc. - Y precisamente para que los horrendos palurdos de este siglo, que se nutren con pulque y enchiladas en sus días de campo, sobre la belleza de nuestros monumentos, no sigan manchándonos con su presencia intolerable; precisamente para que las obras hermosas que la arquitectura colonial nos legó, no sean convertidas en bazares de necedad y de lujuria enguantada en seda; precisamente para que el monorrritmo torturante de esas revistas en que desfilan los mismos gendarmes, los mismos políticos, los mismos danzones, no sigan torturándonos; (…) precisamente para eso, os hemos convocado.” Alonzo Romero, 115. (Alonzo’s use of the plural after the surname of well-known composers such as Pedro Luis Ogazón, Julián Carrillo or Manuel M. Ponce, is not literal, but rather a rhetorical mechanism to mark them as a type of composer of art music. With this gesture he places them as belonging to the same group of who he thinks are exemplary composers).
criticism of what he calls “vernacular” musical theater is as much a matter of musical quality or taste as it is an issue of the use of public spaces by the people that, in his view, “stain” them. His prejudice against the music performed in these spaces leads him to consider the people who make and consume it as usurpers of these architectural legacies. Therefore, he feels compelled and naturally entitled to reclaim them. His disapproval of the practices of eating enchiladas and drinking pulque in these spaces is not incidental: they were both traditional gastronomic customs of the local people he calls “the horrendous hicks of this century.”

Furthermore, his deprecating reproach to the fijís, and to the damsels with their sparkling mascara-lined eyes and silk gloves—discloses his disdain for the newly rich.

Alonzo refers to the musical variety show (Revista musical) as insipid [sosos], torturing and by extension, discredits those who enjoy or who dance to Antillean rumbas and danzones. It is worth calling to mind that these are both Afro-Caribbean genres. The ground for the aesthetic deprecation of these racialized genres is its sameness and/or repetitiveness: “eternal rhumbas”, “mono-rhythmic dances,” “the same insipid music.”

A case can be made about Alonzo’s implicit criticism of these styles of popular music that, by virtue of their harmonic “circularity”, do not participate in the Romantic, centro-European musical teleologies that would suggest the “development” and “progress” desired for Mexico.

Skillfully, Alonzo Romero deploys his knowledge of some Mexican conservatory composers trained in Europeanized composition: Ogazón, Castillo, Moctezuma, Carrillo, Ponce, Barajas. In my view,

---

225 Porfirian negative discourses on a corn-based diet emerged simultaneously with debate about nutritional sciences and public health. These discourses tended to link tortilla with “poor nutrition” and “backwardness.” For a documented account about the ways in which nutrition was part of the elite discourses see Jeffrey Pilchner, M. Que Vivan Los Tamales!: Food and the Making of Mexican Identity. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 82-83.

226 Music theorist Jonathan Kramer has analyzed those specific sonic elements that have been discursively constructed as material tokens of such alleged “higher cultural development”. Among these, Kramer highlights the use of complicated harmonic journeys as a teleological allegory of development. Meanwhile, “circularity” and “repetition”, most saliently rhythmic repetition, have been narrated as indicative of a lower phase of musical and hence cultural development. See Jonathan Kramer, The Time of Music (New York: Schirmer Books, 1988).
this gesture is an attempt to use his musical taste – a trait of what Pierre Bourdieu has called “social distinction” – to place himself in a superior social position.  

Following Subirats’ argument, I interpret Alonzo’s discourse as a performative act in which, by invoking a heroic collective subject embodied in this council of *letrados*, he constructs an inferior otherness. As Subirats explains,

> The construction of the heroic subject is extolled as a central motif. The necessary synthesis of the classic virtues of military art and the medieval virtues of the crusader is in itself a legitimizing instance of the complex and delicate structure of the American conquest. This is regardless of the fact that the *Cartas de relación* by [Hernán] Cortés also display, along with those archaizing moments of the glorification of the crusade, the modern representation of the one self-sufficient subjectivity and, above all, self-constituted as an art work.  

Alonzo characterizes the “horrendous hicks” in terms of what he believes is a less refined musical, artistic and even gastronomical taste, taking as the valid reference his own tastes in these matters, which, he assumes, is shared by the people whom he is addressing. This act serves to legitimize his cohort and himself as the authentic heirs of European heritage, as if partaking in Europeanized culture somehow placed them in a superior condition of being. Through this symbolic maneuver, he differentially classifies the lower classes and portrays himself and his cohort as the true salvation for the vulgarism that threatens Mexico City and its colonial architecture. In close parallelism with the old colonial argument of “saving souls”, mayor Alonzo expresses his desire to rescue the city from those he sees as a sort of new barbarian. Conveniently, however, he

---

227 According to Bourdieu, “distinction” implies the reinforcement of group relationships through the consumption of cultural goods so as to build a sense of community, and hence, class identity. This depends on distinguishing those with taste from those without it. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

228 Subirats, *El continente vacío*, 64.

229 This attempt did not passed unnoticed by actors of the revista musical shows. The inauguration of the Council was closely followed some comedy actors. The play “los siete pecados capitales” by the Lupe Rivas Cacho’s company at the Teatro Iris enacted a parody of the act. For information of this case see AHDF-SDP Vol. 812, File 1661, (1921). “El prólogo de la revista quiere ser sensacional, mediante una broma que borra el título y aun toda relación con los pecados capitales, y no resulta sino una injustificada y tonta ironía contra el Consejo Cultural.”
fails to acknowledge that both the género ínfimo and the revista musical he so harshly criticizes were also musical legacies of Spain.

The Council of Arts and Culture embarked on a battle to recuperate the city and its architectural treasures by trying to deny access to people they considered “shameful.” The council elected diplomat and playwright Federico Gamboa as their president. Six months later, in the name of Art and Culture, Gamboa presented the following request:

To the petition presented by Mr. councilor Mr. Manuel Bauche Alcalde, in the ordinary session held yesterday, the assembly approved that this council address to the honorable Ayuntamiento office, over which you preside with such dignity, this proposition, in order that, if this does not represent any inconvenience, you direct due orders so that Mr Governor of the Federal District, in his turn, give strict orders to deny access to mendicants, ragged and shameful people in the downtown area. [...] I communicate this to Your Honor so that you may resolve it. I present to your honor the security of my highest and most distinguished consideration. President of the Council of Art and Culture of the City. “In the name of Art and Culture.” México, Octubre, 18th, 1922, Federico Gamboa.230

Three days later, Gamboa’s petition was well received by Miguel Lerdo de Tejada and sent to evaluation by Alonzo Romero.231 After three more days, Gamboa restated his petition. The file at the Ayuntamiento does not include any further reference to this case. It is very possible that Gamboa’s petition did not succeed. First because the circulation of Mexican citizens in the streets was not a matter in the jurisdiction of the Consejo Cultural y Artístico; and secondly, because the legal figure of “garantías individuales” as written in the recently amended Constitution of 1917 ensured all citizens, whatever their social class or race, to freely transit in the country.232 Therefore to the dismay

230 “A moción hecha por el señor consejero don Manuel Bauche Alcalde, en la sesión ordinaria celebrada ayer, la asamblea aprobó que este consejo dirija a ese H. Ayuntamiento, tan dignamente presidido por usted, la presente excitativa a fin de que, si para ello no tiene inconveniente, dicte sus respetables órdenes para que el señor Gobernador del Distrito, a su vez, de órdenes exactas [sic] para evitar que los mendigos, barapientos y vergonzantes, circulen por el centro de la ciudad. [...] Protesto ante usted la seguridad de mi más alta y distinguida consideración, Presidente del Consejo Cultural y Artístico de la ciudad. Por la cultura y por el Arte, México, 18 de octubre, de 1922, Federico Gamboa.” “Petición para que los mendigos no circulen por el centro.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 3924, File 64, Foja 13, (1922).

231 Idem, Foja 14.

232 “Garantías individuales” was the term used in the Constitution of 1917 as an update of the section “human rights” consecrated in the Constitution of 1857.
of the elites, those they saw as “ragged and shameful” remained in the central streets of the City of Palaces, and continued attending the carpas shows if so they desired.

Conclusions

The case of the segregation of the carpa theaters allows us to observe how the process of urban modernization of Mexico City articulated too the reification of the physical space in downtown which resulted in its segregated use. Pierre Bourdieu has explained how the distancing of physical spaces has a direct effect on the distancing of social groups.233 In the case of music making in Mexico in the early twentieth century, we see too that the extent to which the physical spaces for music making were hierarchized according to the repertory they offered, the distance between the people who practiced and enjoyed these musics was also naturalized. As Bourdieu appointed: “Since social space is inscribed in the spatial structures as well as in the mental structures […] space is one of the places where power is exerted and confirmed in its most subtle form: symbolic violence, as a form of invisible [inaperçue] violence.”234

In the symbolic realm, the elites projected an imaginary of “incivility”, “precariousness” and “lack of refinement” onto the carpas community, something they needed to see in order to maintain an antagonistic otherness. This would explain why, for instance, music critics ignored the fact that the musical repertory played at the carpas was very close to that performed in formal theaters, allowing them to criticize the “lack of artistic value” of the music of the teatros de barrio

The notions of “civilization” and “progress” purported by the highest ranked state officers were confronted by the City’s policymakers through two blatantly contradictory arguments. On the

---


one hand, authorities thought that—although the carpas were “disastrous and shameful”—they were a necessary evil useful to contain the destructive tendencies of the poor. On the other, after the decline of Díaz, authorities came to believe that the género ínfimo offered at the carpas mitigated the strict morality of the nineteenth century, thus laying the groundwork for a more cosmopolitan and modern city. In either case, the survival of these shows was seen as something positive, and hence their spaces of performance were assured, even as they were segregated.

Although they never were never entirely ejected from the downtown area, carpas companies that were unwilling or unable to abide by official norms of appearance or repertory eventually moved to other neighborhoods such as Tepito, Santa María La Redonda, La Merced, La Lagunilla, or the colonia Obrera. In the long term, the theaters located in the barrios that had been marginalized by the modernization craze were thought to be the places that “naturally” corresponded to the poor. Meanwhile the central streets, with better infrastructure and hosting the treasured colonial heritage, were thought to “naturally” correspond to the elites for economic, touristic and administrative purposes. Gamboa’s petition to the Council of Art and Culture to limit the entrance of certain people to the downtown perpetuated the old idea that not all people had an equal right to use the heritage spaces in the downtown area, nor to participate equally in public life. Although in legal terms the Constitution of 1917 claimed to guarantee social equality, daily social interactions were not modified for the benefit of the historically marginalized groups and their cultural practices. In the case of regulation of the carpas shows, authorities considered themselves to be dealing with “mere entertainment”; and so fundamentally anti-democratic initiatives passed unnoticed, or were justified as contributing to the process of political change and democratic progress. Thus old, oppressive social patterns were retained and reinforced well into the post-revolutionary period.
Segregating the activities thought to correspond to each social group was important for the authorities, because it created and reinforced the notion that different people were to occupy different symbolic and material spaces in the city. Ultimately, this would justify one of these groups ruling over the other, and enhance governability in the modern post-revolutionary state. To make this happen, a notion of ‘superiority,’ acknowledged by both sides of the social divide, was indispensable. Differential patterns of distribution of entertainment helped this purpose.

Carlos Monsiváis used the term “dissident cartographies” to refer to alternative representations of the patterns of distribution of entertainment. These pictorial contestations are based on perceptions of use of public space according to social class. Such representations would illustrate how the current geography of entertainment in the downtown area still shows traces of the pattern of social segregation from the early twentieth century. Nowadays, night-clubs and dancing halls generally perceived as “low class” are located between the streets of Belisario Dominguez and the Plaza de Garibaldi, across from the former colonia Santa María La Redonda, an area that once hosted many of the displaced carpas. The music played in these night-clubs ranges from cumbia and salsa to electronic-pop and Latin pop music. Many of these clubs are homosexual dance halls, and some of them offer live sex shows. By contrast, the places targeted for international tourists are located to the Northwest of the Zócalo between the streets of 5 de Febrero and Eje Central (East to West) and Belisario Dominguez and Mesones, (North to South). With the celebration of the Bicentennial (2010), the downtown area was refurbished and the touristic area expanded to South of the Alameda Central, where new corporate hotels were built. (Fig 2.7)

After the 1930s, and during the nationalistic period, culture officers, film and TV entrepreneurs, eager to create icons of popular culture, “cleaned” and “dignified” the carpas shows. The once modest carpas, formerly held under tents, were relocated to the central area in formal theaters that served to showcase the nascent Mexican film industry. What I have identified as “the late carpas scene” played a crucial role in crystallizing the social representations of these ‘poor’ and ‘inferior’ citizens through the caricatures of vagrants, indigenous people, peasants in the city and drunken mestizos that both revista theaters and earlier carpas had created. I address these topics in chapters four and five.
Chapter Three

Escándalos and Nightly Shows: the (Failed) Attempt at Sonic Control

The production of music has as its function the creation, legitimation and maintenance of order. Its primary function is not to be sought in aesthetics, which is a modern invention, but in the effectiveness of its participation in social regulation. Music [...] creates order. It constitutes the collective memory and organizes society. Music is lived in the labor of all. It is a collective selection process operating in the festival, the collective accumulation and stockpiling of code.

Jacques Attali, *Noise*. 236

For most of the nineteenth century, the soundscape of Mexico City had been characterized by the clanging of the many church bells in the area, by the bouncing wheels of carriages, and by the smooth trot of mules on mud-covered streets. But at the turn of the century, the typical sounds of everyday life, the knife-sharpener’s whistle, the organillero’s barrel and the local pregones (the mellifluous chants of the street vendors), began to fuse with the cracking sounds of the tram, ringing telephones and the buzzing hiss of electric light bulbs. The central tram station, located at the west end of the Zócalo, sent off numerous cars whose rumbling in the early hours of the morning signaled the sounds of technological progress. (Fig. 3.1)

---

As the year 1910 approached, the Zócalo, was refurbished as part of the Porfirian project to embellish the downtown area in preparation for the Centennial of independence. The modifications came with unforeseen effects on the architectural acoustics of the area. If on the one hand the new materials used in the update highlighted the architectural beauty of the colonial buildings, on the other, they also increased the resonance of the main square. The streets passed from mud to cobble, and in the enthusiasm for embellishment, the Ayuntamiento Palace was decorated with Poblano talavera tiles, providing the building with the characteristic colonial grandeur that characterizes it today, but also adding a highly sound-reflective material to its walls. To allow a view of the principal square in its entirety, the trees from the Cathedral’s atrium were cut down in 1914, making the Zócalo lose the shade provided by its ash and abuehuete trees, and also preventing

---

237 Talavera tiles from Puebla Mexico, is a type of maiolica pottery with a characteristic milky-white glaze. The Spanish brought this Maiolica pottery to Mexico in the sixteenth century. Much of this pottery was decorated only in blue patterns over a white background. Production of this ceramic became highly developed in Puebla because of the availability of fine clays and the demand for tiles from the newly established churches and monasteries in the area. It was a valued feature of colonial architecture. The demonym Poblano, is used to distinguish this Mexican pottery from that of the Spanish town Talavera de la Reina.

238 In chapter two of this dissertation, I explain who these urban planners were and discuss their plan for modernizing the City.
their former function as effective natural sonic buffers. After the armed phase of the Mexican revolution (1910-1920), the recently cobbled streets were changed again and paved to host the automobile, which was then propelled with bigger and more powerful gas engines. After all these changes, the great plaza could be seen in all its splendor; a stunning sight, intended to amaze foreign visitors. Inevitably, it was during those years that the sonic conformation of the main square changed most dramatically. The Zócalo became a sort of acoustic box made of solid quarry, volcanic, and river stones. To this, the numerous construction sites added even more noise to the surroundings. A picture of the Zócalo taken in 1925, once the modifications stopped, shows it’s the appearance it acquired after the modifications (Fig. 3.2). The photo was taken to show the crowds that congregated in front of the Cathedral.

Figure 3.2. “Crowd in front of the Metropolitan Cathedral” (Aglomeración afuera de la Catedral Metropolitana) (1925) Archivo Casasola, SINAFO 2373

239 For an inspiring work on the effects of architectural changes in the acoustics of the urban space see Emily Thompson in The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900-1933. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002).

240 With the exception of the trams and the gardens, both of which have been removed, the Zócalo remains with this shape and it is still an architectural acoustic box.
In spite of the new architecture and the technological advances, numerous traditional activities continued to take place in the main square. A site of trade since colonial times, the Zócalo officially hosted street sellers and temporary markets well into the years 1890s. In fact, in the year 1890, downtown neighbors and owners of commercial establishments complained about the many artisanal workshops that settled in the main plaza and its surroundings, urging the local government to clear the main square of such commercial activities.\(^{241}\) However, many street workers resisted the administrative changes that refused them permission to use the Zócalo for trade purposes, and remained in the square as late as the 1920s.\(^{242}\) Entertainment activities were also part of the traditions resisting the rapid changes, and the carpa theaters were still fully embedded as components of this urban sonic environment. As picture labeled Fig 3.3, illustrates, even in the late 1920s a carpa-jacalón settled right in front of the Cathedral, which is the symbolic heart of the city. This portable theater would provide amusement to passersby, adding its share of sound in the form of songs, yells, laughter, and music.\(^{243}\)

---

\(^{241}\) *El Correo Español*, Agosto 2, 1890, referred by Florencia Gutiérrez, 225.

\(^{242}\) For details on the interactions between street sellers and local authorities for the control of space for commercial activities see Florencia Gutiérrez, *El mundo del trabajo y el poder político*, op. cit. and Mario Barbosa Cruz, *El trabajo en las calles*, op. cit.

\(^{243}\) “Gente deambulando afuera de una carpa junto a la Catedral.” Archivo Casasola, Núm. Inv. 91490. (SINAFO). Although the catalogue gives an approximate date of this picture “ca 1930”, my research leads me to believe that the photo was taken in the late 1920s, because in the years 1930s the process of segregation of the carpas out of the central square had already taken full force (See chapter two of this dissertation).
Inspector Samper’s Spiritual Listening

In the humid evening of September 5th, 1922, Inspector Don Carlos Samper walked to the Ayuntamiento Palace, located on the South flank of the Zócalo, to listen to a chamber-music concert at the former Salón de Cabildos, located in the top floor of the building. The size, colonial beauty and elegance of this room made it suitable to be used as a Music Hall. That night, the central plaza’s noise filtered in through the windows, causing great misery to the inspector who, distraught by the sonic environment, recorded his impressions.

It is Beethoven, and that is enough for me to be extremely demanding of myself and of the environment. Under certain conditions, the beginning of a concert tortures me, and I notice this now with prevailing fear. I feel myself left out of the first measures of the “Kreutzer sonata,” and the torture appears right at the [beginning of the] first movement. Fear, oh ye mortals, avid for the sublime rite! Insofar as thy personal conditions and those of the exterior persist in disagreement with the musical act, it is necessary to ignore certain annoying physical sensations: the discomfort of a seat, the vicinity of some uncultured people and, furthermore, the enormous and confusing mass of noise that comes up from the great public square, the traffic in its apogee and the infernal din of whistles, bells and sirens… Beethoven is here. He is the one who calls thee with all the imperative of genius, conducted through two medium-
like ‘virtuosos.’ Waves of wisdom begin their labor around thee, and thou canst already feel thyself departing from the ignoble shore: that thy soul sets foot on the wave that is about to depart, and that finally thou canst abandon, like miserable trash thy mortal aspect [from] all the [disharmony] outside.”244 [Italics are mine].

In his report Samper bitterly describes how the surrounding noises interfered with the moment of spiritual elevation to which the music of Beethoven would have otherwise raised him. Complaining about the pedestrian environment, he laments not being able to reach a higher spiritual realm. In the “confusing mass of noise” and the “infernal din of whistles,” he hears sonic threats to his transfiguring experience. Samper’s idealized model of listening shows his effort to ignore all the bodily aspects of listening; banal bodily and sensorial experiences are configured as hindrances to his musical immersion. What is more, Samper describes not only feeling discomfited, but also “fearful” and “tortured.”

As it was the case for many Mexican middle-class, educated gentlemen in the second decade of the twentieth century, Samper found in Beethoven’s music the sonic representation of artistic genius.246 Accordingly, listening to his music was a means for achieving the spiritual sublime and the

244 “Es Beethoven, y ello basta para que yo extreme mis exigencias para conmigo y para con el medio ambiente. En determinadas condiciones, el principio de un concierto me tortura, y tal advierto ahora con miedo insistente. Me siento fuera de los primeros compases de la ‘sonata a Kreutzer’ y la tortura aparece en pleno primer tiempo. Temed, ¡oh mortales ávidos del sublime rito! Que vuestras condiciones personales y las del exterior persisten en desacuerdo con el acto musical. Es necesario substraerse a ciertas sensaciones físicas molestas, aunque pequeñas: la incomodidad de un asiento, la vecindad de algunos incultos, y más aun la enorme y confusa masa de ruidos que suben desde la gran plaza pública en apogeo del tráfico y en (el) alarde infernal de los silbatos, timbres y sirenas…Beethoven está aquí, es él mismo [sic] quien os llama con todo el imperativo del genio, por conducto de dos ‘virtuosos’ caso mediumnizados; las ondas sabias comienzan su labor en torno vuestro y sentís ya que os desprendéis de la playa innoble: que vuestra alma pone el pie en la ola que va a partir y que al fin podréis abandonar como un misero despojo, vuestro mortal aspecto a todos los prosaísmos del exterior.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1661, September 5, (1922).

245 The fear that certain musical practices inspired in colonizers has been used as a revealing instrument of social analysis in recent musicological works. Aligned within postcolonial theories, these studies defend that the fear inspired by an imagined savage through chant, dance and other music-related activities, acted as a factor of pressure that compelled European subjects to self-position in a superior ontological status with respect to their colonized otherness, thus acting as a factor for the consolidation of the European subjectivity. See Gary Tomlinson, The Singing of the New World: Indigenous Voice in the Era of European Contact (Cambridge, UK; New York Cambridge University Press, 2007); and Olivia Ashley Bloechl, Native American Song at the Frontiers of Early Modern Music (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008). The fear that certain musical practices arose among the Mexican elites in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is in many ways analogous to such colonial anxieties. As such I treat them in this chapter.

246 The cult of Beethoven in Mexico started in the twentieth century (with Julián Carrillo as its main crusader); it was also emphasized in Vasconcelos musical ideology at the beginning of the 1920s. For the connections between
performers were the mediums facilitating the sublime trance. Samper’s discourse would seem to participate in the German-idealist construction of music as ‘the most spiritual of the arts.’ Through his despairing chronicle, Samper performs a writing persona that embraces an idealizing, exclusive attitude to music and to listening. His participation in these ideas, legitimates him as a member of the “cultured” people. Yet clearly, the inspector’s desire to escape the “disharmony outside” does not simply bespeak the pleasure he finds in Beethoven’s music. His distress and apprehensiveness, as inscribed in his report, disclose how Samper’s meticulous perception of sound articulated an imperative need to physically and symbolically draw a barrier between two acoustic communities: divide the noisy from the silent and hence the “uncultured” from the “cultured.”

As I will show in this chapter, it was this aural model of non-reactive, apparently disembodied listening, which counted as “civilized” for the Mexican elites at the time. While Samper does not explicitly indicate that the producers of noise were the same as his “uncultured” neighbors, the context in which the word is embedded makes it almost transparent: the “uncultured” were tacitly, but clearly, entailed in the “noisy.”

Samper’s report is an example of the local authorities’ views. The behavior they expected from the audiences at “proper” musical events was reverent silence. Such composed conduct, I claim, symbolized the progress the elite projected onto the city and its lifestyle. Furthermore, this listening modality also served the elites to distinguish between types of citizens. It was a composed listening that set the boundaries between what Samper perceived as the legitimate urban identity.

---

Vasconcelos’ project and music making see Leonora Saavedra’s Of Selves and Others… Concerning the ideological and aesthetic influences of Julian Carrillo, Alejandro Madrid has is currently working on a manuscript that addresses such issues. I thank him for his feedback on this regard.

247 I borrow the term acoustic community from Barry Truax’s work, who defines it as a system of communication, whereby “sound plays a significant role in defining the community spatially, temporally in terms of daily and seasonal cycles, as well as socially and culturally in terms of shared activities, rituals and dominant institutions. The community is linked and defined by its sounds.” See Barry Truax, Acoustic Communication (Westport, Conn: Ablex, 2001), 58.
and those people who produced a confusing mass of noise, whether sitting close to him or out in the great public square.

In this chapter I explore the soundscape of Mexico City in the time of the early carpas shows and infer how the sonic cultures of these itinerant theaters were immersed in the class struggle for the urban space, and in the dominant ideologies of the time. I interrogate the conflict between the aural culture that authorities desired for the capitalino society and the actual sonic manifestations of common people, as illustrated by those who participated in the carpas shows as audience members or as performers. I claim that the distance between these two aural/sonic cultures can be interpreted as an analogy of the distance between the two kinds of citizens implied by authorities: the legitimate citizens, conformed by “lettered” men (governors, intellectuals, councilors, inspectors, press writers and the women with whom they related), and the “unlettered” or “uncultured”, which is to say a sort of backwards and inferior or second class citizen.

The theoretical strains I pursue in this chapter are in dialogue with the work of a number of scholars who have integrated analysis of soundscapes into historic, anthropological and sociological inquiry. Ana Ochoa Gautier, for example, has emphasized that the “aural turn” entails a repositioning of the role of aurality in the conformation of the public sphere in Latin America.\(^{248}\) This epistemic turn has encouraged “listening to become a locus for analysis and political struggle” and as such, it allows questioning the patterns of social interaction and structures of power engendered by sound and hearing.\(^{249}\) In the following pages, I inquire into the ways in which sound and aural practices triggered struggles lived by people participating in the carpas shows, as they inhabited encultured sonorous worlds in conflict.


\(^{249}\) Idem, 808.
My ultimate goal is to demonstrate that the state’s project to construct and maintain social distinctions – to control what Ochoa Gautier has called “the aural public sphere” – ultimately failed. The reasons behind such failure can be attributed to what Ochoa Gautier has identified as “unequal modernity;” I will redefine it as “failed modernity.” Such failure was manifested in the people’s desire to either preserve their sonic cultures and musical practices, leading in turn to non-compliance with official desires to enforce a “civilized sonic conduct,” or else to blatant defiance of the government’s rules of sonic order. In other cases, adoption of new musical practices was motivated by the emergence of new musical genres that were discordant with the model of aurality the dominant ideology endorsed. Moreover, I sustain that the most palpable reason behind the failure is the very slippery nature of sonic culture, which exists not only in the form of airwaves, but also in the memories, the bodies and the subjectivities of music makers, music users and listeners.

As a native of Mexico City and lover of the Downtown area, I have placed myself as a character within my historical narrative in the first section of this chapter. By positioning myself in the midst of contemporary Mexico City, I seek not only to provide a present-time account of the sounds in the City, but also and by so doing, to offer an auto-ethnographic account of how nationality, class, gender, age, historical and ethnic background mediate sonic perception of the City. I firmly believe that by making such a position explicit, the reader will better understand the conflicts that arise from quotidian social interactions between people with different social backgrounds in the same physical and sonic space. I frame my narrative within a typical day of research at the historical archive, going back and forth between past and present. With strict reference to archival registers, I then elaborate fictional stories based on real characters and real-life events as documented in the civil registers of the Ayuntamiento Archive.
Mexico City’s Downtown and its Sounds in my Ear

The archive that hosts the collection of the Ayuntamiento office, where inspector Samper submitted his report nearly a hundred years ago, is no longer hosted in the former Ayuntamiento building of the Zócalo square, but in the building once named Palacio de los Condes de Hera Soto, and which currently is the Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (hereafter AHDF) located a few blocks to the East of the Zócalo, at the corner of the streets República de Chile and Donceles. This corner has been closely connected to the musical life of the city since the start of the twentieth century. The intersection is a few steps away from the former Teatro Arbeu - today’s old Cámara de Diputados (House of Congress)— and the Teatro Esperanza Iris, a main entertainment center in the 1920s. The former theater was an entertainment venue well known for working in the tandas modality, and for its frequent and often scandalous performances of género chico; the latter was originally built in 1918 by Esperanza Iris (1888-1962), the Mexican diva of zarzuela and operetta. This venue for musical performance bore her name until the year 1976, when the state confiscated it and renamed it Teatro de la Ciudad; it is still a venue where today’s Capitalinos can enjoy musical shows. From the start of the twentieth century, this corner has not changed its musical vocation, and the building now hosting the AHDF, a colonial mansion has seen these urban stories reveal themselves.

Nowadays, inside the thick colonial walls of the archive, students, historians, research assistants, and doctoral candidates like myself silently submerge ourselves in our thoughts, reading thick leather volumes, trying to ignore the annoying noises outdoors in order to stay focused. The archive’s Baroque façade adjoins the doors of stores purveying cheap, fancy gowns for quinceañeras,

---

250 This colonial *casona*, which in the early nineteenth century belonged to the Conde de Heras Soto, is considered another one of the “Architectural colonial jewels” of the city. Fitting its baroque architecture, the Archive has been renamed “Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora.” For the social implications of the heritage denomination “architectural jewels”, see chapter two of this dissertation.
or coming-out celebrations. Big speakers on the sidewalk saturate the streets with the rhythms of cumbia and reggaeton to their loudest power. Although I would like to conceive of myself as an informed academic who understands and therefore tolerates the social implications of the control of the sonic space, I cannot help but disliking the loud honks and engines, as well as the deafening litanies by the stores’ salesmen, who describe their products at full volume through speakers in front of the stores outside.

As I guide my quest through the dusty files describing the urban soundscape that years ago afflicted inspector Samper, I try to imagine how this city’s roars may have transformed and how our interpretation of sounds nowadays varies from that of hundred years ago. Just as today salsa, local pop, cumbia, and corrido music accompany my daily walks through the streets of Mexico City’s downtown, so too the music coming out through the thin wood walls of the carpas would have added to the city’s soundscape. Would the unbearable “din” that the despondent inspector Samper described as an “infernal clangor” even resemble the one I have known since I was a child? Granted my resistance to decibel power must be greater than Samper’s but, would my ear even perceive the noises that in those years bothered the inspector so deeply? Who were the people in the Plaza Mayor that in 1921 so much annoyed inspector Samper? Who were the “uncultured ones” that Samper talks about and why did he consider them so? Who were those blowing whistles, and setting off sirens, interrupting the Kreutzer Sonata and causing the inspector’s distress? What city and which social actors assaulted Samper’s listening through the windows? Did their social standing really have

---

251 Trying to configure sound studies as an academic field, Jonathan Sterne describes what it takes to be a sounds scholar. He uses the expression “Sonic Imaginations” to explain the speculative thought allowed by paying close attention to the sound: “Sonic imagination is a deliberately synaesthetic neologism - it is about sound, but it occupies an ambiguous position between sound culture, and a space of contemplation outside of it. Sonic imaginations are necessarily plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and re-describe. They are fascinated by sound but driven to fashion some new intellectual facility to make sense of some part of the sonic world.” See Jonathan Sterne, “Sonic Imaginations”, Introduction to The Sound Studies Reader (New York: Routledge, 2012), 5.
anything to do with their propensity to cause noise? And what most entices my curiosity is the question of why the inspector felt so vexed by the noise outside. What did he really fear?

As I continue my inquiries, a librarian sitting at the corner’s desk of the Archive’s library discretely intones current pop ballads in vogue. After having tried to ignore the cheesy lyrics coming out from the tiny speakers of his computer, I make even harder efforts not to complain or ask him to use his earphones (only he has access to the special collections and, if upset, he could potentially deny valuable volumes to me). “He should know better” I mumble to myself; “This is unacceptable for a research library!” I protest taking a pair of earplugs out of my purse at the time that I insert them in my ears. “If they hired people with higher education, this would not be a problem”, I add to my silent reproach. I look at my notes about inspector Samper and, all of a sudden, I feel an unexpected sympathy for the man. Conflicted by my own thoughts, I return to the social conflicts that noise in the city sprung in the years 1900s.

Women on Stage and the Escándalo Caused by the Género Psicalíptico

Mr. Ignacio Dávila, manager of the Teatro Apolo, woke up on the morning of Tuesday, March 31, 1903 to news that caused him great annoyance.\(^{252}\) The newspaper *El Imparcial* had accused his theater of being a site where “public escándalo took place daily.”\(^{253}\) Indignant at what he read, Don Ignacio decided immediately to write an official petition to Don Agustín Alfredo Nuñez, Chief of Public

---

\(^{252}\) An additional reference to tumult in the Teatro Apolo can be found in the same newspaper, with an article entitled “Formidable escándalo en un teatro” dated February 23\(^{rd}\) 1903. Source taken from the published compilation in Luis Reyes de la Maza, *El teatro en México durante el Porfrismo. Tomo III, 1900-1910.* (México: Inst. de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1968.), 201.

\(^{253}\) While the English term “scandal” and the Spanish “escándalo” phonetically resemble one another and are somehow semantically connected, their semantic nature is slightly different. The English term scandal connotes gossip, rumors, calumny or disrepute. The Spanish “escándalo”, in contrast, is mainly used for both its sonic implications (loudness, din, tumults and sonic disorder) as well as for its connotations of disruption to the social order. In this and the following chapters, I will thus opt for the original Spanish term.
Entertainment at the Ayuntamiento, asking him to send an inspector to his theater to contravene the newspaper note. Not having received a prompt response, two weeks later Mr. Dávila insisted:

The Teatro Apolo, located in the 9th street of Mosqueta, is not the meeting place of those wasted people in the streets of Lerdo and Los Angeles, since its ground-floor boxes and orchestra sections up to the dividing line are attended by honest middle-class families, and by the inferior class from the dividing line to the galleries.” I must protest that the only tumult [escándalos] that have been registered are motivated by the whistling and shouting [of the audience], some times demanding the reprise of a number, and generally when the lights go out, which is at eleven in the evening, and this is only for a few seconds, for only once did the theatre remain in darkness for five minutes.254

In this report, Mr. Dávila is not only invested in securing the reputation of his theater by refuting the newspaper’s accusation. Clearly he is also interested in separating the audience that attended to his theater from those whom he called the “wasted people of Lerdo and Los Angeles.”

As registers reveal, in 1903 Teatro Apolo was located in the barrio Santa María La Redonda. The other ignoble street intersection he refers to –Lerdo and Los Angeles- was located a few blocks to the north in the Plaza Zaragoza, closer to the neighborhood of Tlatelolco. (See map 1 in Appendix 1) Most likely a carpa theater had settled there.255 Davila’s defense of the Teatro Apolo suggests that there were cases when enthusiastic spectators demanded repetition of a number, thus

254 Ignacio Dávila, [Manager of the Teatro Apolo], AHDF- Vol. 806, File. 1260, (April 15th, 1903). [Italics are mine]: “El Teatro Apolo situado en la 9a. calle de la Mosqueta, no es el punto de reunión de la gente perdida de las calles de Lerdo y Los Ángeles, puesto que concurren a sus departamentos de patio y plateas personas y familias honradas de la clase media y de la clase inferior de la demarcación a la galería; […] Debo manifestar a ud. por ultimo que los únicos escándalos que se registran son motivados por gritos y silbidos, algunas veces para hacer bisar algún número y generalmente cuando falta la luz que es a las once de la noche y esto por unos cuantos segundos, pues solo una vez permaneció el [t]eatro [a] oscuras como cinco minutos.”

255 In spite of its proximity to downtown, Tlatelolco emerged as an industrial area during the Porfirián years. It therefore contrasted with the touristic and business-oriented profile that had been recently created for the central neighborhood. While the population of each of these neighborhoods may not have differed considerably in terms of social class, the different architectural aesthetics in each area may have contributed to prompt social class associations. While the transformation of downtown into a business neighborhood was successful during the Porfirián years, this process happened without necessarily eradicating the housing function of the area. In fact, demographic studies that focus in these years, suggest that with the construction of the Avenue Paseo de la Reforma and with the creation of new neighborhoods such as the Colonia Roma or the Hipódromo Condesa, many of the casonas in downtown were gradually abandoned by the elites and began to be occupied by the urban working class and by the many immigrants who had recently arrived to the city. See Mario Barbosa Cruz “La ciudad: Crecimiento urbano y población” in Problemas de urbanización en el Valle de México: Un homenaje visual en la celebración de los centenarios, 173-190 (México: UAM, Cuajimalpa, 2009); and Dolores Morales María, “Espacio, propiedad y órganos de poder en la Ciudad de México en el siglo XIX” in Carlos Illades Rodríguez and Ariel Kuri (eds.) Ciudad de México : instituciones, actores sociales y conflicto político, 1774-1931. (Zamora, Mich.: El Colegio de Michoacán, 1996).
breaking the peace of the night. Dávila manifests a particular concern in outlining the conformation of his audience in terms of social class, perhaps believing that in spite of the presence of the “inferior classes” in the gallery, the middle-class families in the orchestra section would secure the honorability of his audience altogether, regardless of how loud their enthusiastic responses were.

Inspectors and councilors writing for civil registers, as much as music critics writing theater chronicles, often used the Spanish term “escándalo” [din, tumult, noise] to indicate cases where the accepted standards of public order had been somehow disrupted. Although the word escándalo was often used as legal argumentation in documents such as fines and detentions, the term was not legally defined. As a result, it was the assessment of inspectors that determined when something went beyond the limits of the sonically – which often meant the morally – acceptable. Despite the legal vacuum the term entailed, inspectors used it to mark disorder or misbehavior. The frequency with which it appears in the records illustrates that official appraisals of silence and circumspection served as a measure of public control, and as an index of the urban citizens’ degree of civilization.256

If what accounted as an escándalo could have ranged from loud fights to vivid laughter, the term also denoted disturbances to tacit norms of conduct and morality: in other words, instances of social noise. Escándalos commonly occurred when cancellation or censorship of certain musical numbers provoked boisterous objection from disappointed members of the audience (hence called escandalosos). This happened in June of 1904, with cancellation of the Spanish zarzuela El Congreso Feminista (story by Celso Lucio López and music by Joaquin Valverde Jr.) in the Teatro Principal.257

256 The entire ethic of ‘respectable’ music making depends upon silencing the audience. Considerable work has been done on the progress of this silencing, which took place in European theaters between about 1790-1830. Before that time, the entire dynamic between listeners and performers was a good deal more open and dialogical—even in the most ‘respectable’ venues. For a commentary on the transformations of audience performance see “An Evening at the Theater: An imaginary Re/creation” in Elisabeth LeGuin. The Tonadilla in Performance: Lyric Comedy in Enlightenment Spain. 2013), 20-43.

257 "a las siete de la noche recibió la empresa la orden de suspensión y desde luego se anunció que sería sustituida la zarzuela por El día de San Eugenio. Esto fue lo que motivó la bronca que se produjo anoche y que llegó al extremo del escándalo: cuando principió la zarzuela que sustitúa a la que iba a ser estrenada, los espectadores protestaron con toda
At seven o’clock in the evening the company received the order of suspension [of El Congreso Feminista] and it was announced that it would be substituted for El día de San Eugenio. This was what motivated last night’s fuss, which turned into an escándalo: when the zarzuela that replaced the one [announced] to be premiered, spectators protested with all energy and demanded by shouting that El Congreso Feminista be performed. A Cuban man from the top of the gallery section seemed to be leading the escandalosos. [The events] were notified to the General Police Inspection; the lieutenant coronel Díaz […] commanded that [night-shift guards] and mounted police forces from neighboring commissaries were sent […] The public continued being furious and several times the [theater’s] curtain had to be dropped, for actors were interrupted with shouts and whistles […] Lieutenant Díaz commanded that escandalosos were taken to the commissary, and so it was done, with several individuals captured including some well-known people.

Apparently, the reasons for the cancellation of El Congreso Feminista had little to do with the content of the plot. The historians Leal, Flores and Barraza have claimed that the Ayuntamiento’s objections to the performance of this play responded to a legal problem. López and Valverde, authors of this género chico zarzuela, had sued the company Arcaraz acting in the Teatro Principal for not having paid the rights of performance of this and other plays. The judge in charge of the case commanded that the company did not premier any Spanish piece before the problem had been solved, but the company did not abide by the restriction.

What is clear from this account is that the cancellation of the announced piece provoked a greater escándalo than the play would have done by itself. The mention of “a Cuban man who seemed to lead the escandalosos” is also significant for a discussion of aural perceptions. While the account does not clarify why this man was thought to be from Cuba, I infer that such identification was connected to his patterns of speech. If the man had a distinctive Caribbean accent, his voice was...

energía y pedían a gritos que se representara El Congreso Feminista. Un cubano desde lo alto de las galerías, parecía dirigir a los escandalosos. Se dio aviso a la Inspección General de Policía; el teniente coronel Díaz[…] mandó que fuesen enviadas las imaginarias de las comisarías inmediatas y una fuerza montada […] El público seguía rabioso y varias veces hubo que bajar el telón, pues los actores eran interrumpidos con gritos y silbidos. […] El teniente Díaz mandó que fueran conducidos a la comisaría los escandalosos, y así se hizo, habiendo sido capturados varios individuos, entre otros algunas personas conocidas.” “Gran escándalo en el teatro Principal por cancelación del estreno de la zarzuela El Congreso Feminista,” in El Imparcial, (June 5, 1904) in Reyes de la Maza, 246-247.

258 In fact, Leal sustains that El Congreso Feminista had been premiered two weeks earlier at the Teatro Riva Palacio without legal consequences because, in contrast with the Principal, this theater complied with the agreement established between the performing company and the Sociedad de Autores Españoles, which was the legal representative of Spanish authors in Mexico. Juan Felipe Leal, Carlos Flores y Eduardo Barraza, El cinematógrafo y los teatros: Anales del cine en México 1895-1911, Vol 6. 1900: Segunda parte, (México D.F: Voyager/Ediciones y Gráficos Eón, 2003), 210.
perhaps perceived as abnormal in the context of the city and thus more noticeable to the Capitalino ear. His complaints about the cancellation were probably more striking, hence the perception of him as the “leader of the escandalosos” [noise makers].

Another common reason for escándalos was the enthusiastic reactions to certain musical numbers. At the turn of the century, it was most likely the representation of género chico and psicaliptic couplets that caused the most boisterous responses from spectators. As a press article explained in 1902, “The true cause of the escándalos at the Principal relies on the género chico, which makes for the theater’s unique asset. […] The escándalo and the escandalosos have their origins there, and are their genuine product. They are the sons of the tanda.”

The most obvious sign of the reputed immorality of the género psicalíptico was the ever-troublesome female body. The prominent participation of tiple[s] in musical theater endorsed an openly sexual appeal; it was on this aspect where the tipes identity and distinction were grounded. In 1899 an anonymous critic for the newspaper *El Cómico* wrote:

> What is a tiple? […] In musical language, a tiple is a woman who has a certain kind of voice, but this happens in opera, and the meaning changes entirely when the theater changes. In the tandas, a tiple generally means a young woman who gets on stage to flirt with her audience. If on top of being young, she has a pretty face, she is designated with the title of ‘distinguished tiple.’ If on top of being young and pretty, she is well shaped, she is judged an ‘outstanding tiple.’ The old and fat are no longer tiples, even if they may still have their voices. To be a tiple, is necessary to be young, and tiples are generally imported from Spain.

These singers may have challenged pre-established notions of femininity and morality in the sense that they presented a more active and empowered female role. What is more, many women starring

---

259 “La verdadera razón de los escándalos del Principal radica en el género chico, que constituye su patrimonio exclusivo […] El escándalo y los escandalosos tienen ahí su origen y constituyen un producto genuino, son hijos de la tanda.” *El Imparcial*, (Octubre 15, 1902) in Reyes de la Maza, 189.

260 “Qué cosa es una tiple? (…) En el lenguaje musical se llama tiple a una mujer que posee cierto tono de voz, pero esto pasa en la ópera y el significado cambia absolutamente en cambiando de teatro. En las tandas una tiple quiere decir generalmente una joven que sale a coquetear con el público. Si además de joven es guapa de rostro, se le designa con el calificativo de “tiple distinguida”. Si además de joven y guapa de rostro es de buenas formas, se la califica de “tiple notable”. Las viejas y jamonas ya no son tiples aunque posean voz de idem. Para ser tiple es preciso ser joven y las tiples se importan generalmente de España.” *El Cómico*, (February 5, 1899).
in the couplet scene in formal theaters were also successful theater impresarios. This made them perform social roles that were far from ornamental. Women such as Esperanza Iris, María Conesa, or María Guerrero followed long-established theatrical practice in taking full responsibility—financial, organizational, and artistic—for the day-to-day running of a theater company. Women also attended género chico shows in increasing numbers, both at the theaters and at the carpas. And while this doubled the size of the audiences, authorities also feared that the típles would give other women a “bad example.” Therefore, the presence of el bello sexo, and señoritas in these nightly shows sparked heated debate between the male critics who condemned it, and those who supported it.\textsuperscript{261}

The undeniable public acclaim enjoyed by the género chico, and especially by the psicalipsis, offered new role models for women, thus disrupting the gender binary. Furthermore, it called into question the male-gendered privileging of “High Culture.” To maintain the status quo, the género chico had to be bereft of any aesthetic value. This was achieved not only by epithets such as “frivolous,” “decadent” or “vulgar,” but also by insisting on its associations with “bad taste” and by extension, with el pueblo.

In an article titled “El teatro y la moral” published in 1902, an anonymous critic for El Imparcial – the same newspaper that had accused Dávila’s Teatro Arbeu of public escándalos – prompted public debate around the issue of censoring the género chico. The author contested the official belief that theater was a vehicle for moral education arguing that “if staged comedy is turned into a moral lecture at the price of a tanda fee, the audience will leave and find refuge in a tavern or

\textsuperscript{261} This debate took place in various press sources between the years 1900-1907, precisely when the género chico was in its apogee. The main concern alleged the possibility of a negative reaction from honorable ladies and modest misses in the audience (who were also referred to as the “bello sexo”) and who, as the reporter was certain, could not possibly find any joy in such immoral representations; others believed that the respectable ladies in the audience, could not possibly be offended by such “banal” musical numbers. See for example, El Imparcial, (October 15, 1902). See Luis Reyes de la Maza, 188.
any other place where they find amusement.”

He concluded that having officers censoring musical theater was “redundant.” The grounds for his argument were that common people [el pueblo] needed entertainment instead of moral edification because, as he saw it, these people were naturally inclined to moral dissolution. He states: “all those who attend these theaters know well that the audiences that love the tandas, those who enjoy the savory jokes of the género chico, are not the same as those that crowd the Teatro Hidalgo, comprised in most part by educated workers, who love honest entertainment.” According to his logic, those with “little culture” [poco cultos] would stay and enjoy the género chico, while those with more education would naturally leave the theater if the spectacle showed signs of immorality or bad taste. This underlying presumption illustrates how pairing the alleged immorality of these shows with expectations about the audience’s reaction was used by press editors to ascribe social-class attributes. The author does not mention the reaction he anticipated from the most privileged strata of society. But what he did not foresee is that it was precisely the elites, and later the politicians, who very much enjoyed the tandas of the Teatro Principal as well as the company of the tiples. All in all, the enjoyment of these “immoral” zarzuelas became a matter of taste.

Public concern about the need to censor the género chico reflects to a certain extent the generalized ambiance of social and ideological change reigning in the years around the Mexican Revolution. As the anonymous article in El Imparcial reveals, opinions about the social effects of the género chico in society were disparate among music critics as well as among representatives of the

---

262 “Si se hace del escenario una cátedra de moral a tanto la tanda, el público deserta y se va a refugiar a la taberna o a cualquier lugar en donde encuentre diversión.” El Imparcial, (June 25, 1902) in Reyes de la Maza, El teatro en México, 173-175.

263 “Todos los que frecuentan los teatros saben muy bien que el público amante de la tanda, del que acea a saborear los chistes verdes del género chico, no es el mismo que el que llena el Teatro Hidalgo, formado en su mayoría por familias de obreros medianamente educados y amantes de diversiones honestas.” Idem.

264 There are many press accounts that illustrate how some members of the elite obsessively insisted on the lack of aesthetic value of both the género chico and the revista musical. E Conde de Armería,
Ayuntamiento office. While many conservative music critics urged official actions against it, the author of this article considered that censoring the género chico was unnecessary. As he argued, these staged performances were innocuous and, although they included many jokes, “they were far from causing a lady to blush, and even less, [...] [could they] provoke social dissolution, as if Mexican society would be dissolved by a comedy attended by two hundred spectators.” Little did he know about the decisive role that stage performance would play in “dissolving” the already stagnant moral codes of late Porfirian society. The question of whether or not journalists and music critics agreed on the need to censor the infamous zarzuelas, seems to me less relevant than the fact that this genre ignited a public debate that disclosed the double morality of the Porfiriato.

A policy of control of musical repertory in formal theaters and carpas predated this debate. However, due to official prejudice, the policy was perhaps more strictly applied in the carpas than in the theaters. In conformity with the 3rd and 4th articles of the Official Regulation of Public Entertainment issued in 1894, carpa managers who aspired to have a license for their shows were required to provide the Ayuntamiento office with a list of the musical repertory and other varieties they wanted to perform. As a matter of standard practice, their requests were granted, as long as the companies conformed to the norms of morality and order that the councilor or inspector in duty

265 In chapter two I illustrated official disagreement concerning authorization of these shows.

266 “Los cuadros llenos de chistes] están muy lejos de ruborizar a una dama, ni mucho menos como dicen los críticos, provocar una disolución social como si la sociedad Mexicana pudiera disolverse a causa de una comedia presenciada por doscientos espectadores.” El Imparcial, (June 25th, 1902), in Reyes de la Maza, 173-175.

267 “When the sell of one or more season passes is open the company [should] request permission from the Ayuntamiento, [and] the manager has the obligation to send the program of the show [...] The program presented to the president of the Ayuntamiento will be the same as that announced to the audience through posters, which will be fixed in the facilities of the theaters, or at the venue where the show will [take place], and [the program] will be strictly followed [to avoid] the corresponding punishment, except in fortuitous cases or causes of force majeure, or by serious causes, as judged by the presiding authority” (Cuando se abran uno o varios abonos la empresa solicitará el permiso del Ayuntamiento, teniendo la obligación el empresario de mandar el programa de la función. [...] El programa remitido al Presidente del Ayuntamiento será el mismo que se haga conocer al público por medio de cartelones, que se fijarán en los departamentos del Teatro o local en que se verifique el espectáculo, y será cumplido estrictamente bajo la pena correspondiente, excepto en los casos fortuitos o de fuerza mayor, o por causa grave, a juicio de la autoridad que presida.” Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas. Articles 3rd and 4th (Ediciones Públicas del Ayuntamiento del DF. Dirección de Diversiones: México, 1913), 3.
considered acceptable. If the variety program was approved, the officers stamped it and returned to the company’s manager. As a mechanism of control, every time an inspector or councilor came to a performance, the company’s manager had to show him the program, attached to a notebook that the inspector signed, verifying that the program he had seen was indeed the same as that which had been authorized, and that nothing had gone out of bounds. The truth is that, more often than not, companies’ managers argued that either the notebook or the libretto of the authorized program had been “lost” or “stolen.”

The Strenuous Night of Inspector Jiménez

On a cold night in February 1912, councilor Dr. F. Jiménez de Lagos forgot he had to check the book with the authorized musical program at the carpa María Guerrero. His forgetfulness was perhaps a consequence of the strange happiness he felt that night after having finished his duties at this small and popular theater. The suggestive verses of the “Cuplé de la Regadera” [The Sprinkler

---

268 “Disposiciones para que sean sellados los programas de los espectáculos, por diversas causas.” Vol. 811, File, 1635, (1922); Vol. 825 also contains several examples of programs where the official seal can be verified.


270 The following volumes provide details on fines and sanctions to monitored theatres for not having complied with the norm to show the authorized and officially sealed program: AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1680; Vol. 812, file 1680; Vol. 812, File 1796 “Carpa Ideal, condiciones en que se encuentra la misma”; Vol. 824, Fojas 47, (1921).

271 My fictional character “Jiménez de Lagos” is inspired in a historical subject, a real Ayuntamiento inspector, named “Gutiérrez de Lara,” and whose reports I traced in the archives. The change of name responds to the ethical issue entailed in ascribing actions, reactions, feelings and thoughts to someone who existed, but who has no agency to respond to historical narratives created by me, the historian.

272 In the first decade of the century, a formal theater in Mexico City was named after the Spanish diva who, as stated in her biography published at her death in 1923, traveled for the first time to Mexico in 1899. It is very likely that she was connected to the investment required to keep this venue in business. Reviews of the shows therein performed were weekly published in various newspapers. The case of the carpa María Guerrero is however different. Besides the name, I have not been able to find further connections to this diva and impresario. I have therefore come to assume that the name of this carpa simply followed the local traditions of appropriating the names of formal theaters (Teatro Lírico became the “liriquito” in the carpa’s version for instance).
Couplet], piquantly infused with sexual innuendos, still resounded in his memory. He found a new pleasure in walking back home while matching every step with the beat of the verses in his memory.

The inspector sang under his breath:

Tengo un jardín en mi casa
que es la mar de re’ bonito
Pero no hay quien me lo riegue
y lo tengo muy sequito, ay!
Y aunque no soy jardinera
y me cansa el trabajar
Por la noche aunque no quiera…
me lo tengo que regar.

I have a garden in my house, beautiful as [it is big] the sea
But there is not one to water it, and I have it very dry, oh!
And although I am not a gardener, And I get tired of working
At night, even if I don’t want to…
I have to water it

He then remembered a verse that went something like: “Ahora este macizo/luego esta ladera y un par de chorritos a la enredadera!” (“Now, this [tick] bush, then this slope, and a pair of trickles to the creeper plant”). Jiménez recalled a pause, a never-ending pause that cut the word in two pleasant, disturbing halves. He remembered the disquieting effect of that pause on his imagination. The sight of that buxom body on stage, graciously dancing to the enthralling and soothing rhythms of the brass band came clearly to his mind. That provoking suspension: the tiple turning her back, showing her ravishingly curved delights to all the audience. It was a pause that felt almost too long… and yet at the same time that finished too soon. In no time, the couplet was over and people applauded vigorously. The closing line “Pero me fastidia tener que regar, porque acabo hecha una sopa/y me tengo… que… mu…dar” (“But it annoys me to have to water, because I end up soaking wet, and then I have to change… my… clothes…” ) gave the tiple the perfect excuse to pause once more and teasingly

273 The “Cuplé de la regadera” is part of the zarzuela Alegre Trompetería, composed by Vicente Lleo. The singer I am referring to in this re-creation is María Conesa, one of the best-known Spanish cuplé singers in Mexico City and whose songs and singing style were presumably imitated by many other tiples at the carpas. See the album “La Gatita Blanca” LP. Serie documental Grabaciones Históricas- Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos. Serie Cultural AMEF-03. Another version, recorded in Mexico City in 1908, is that performed by the tiple Señorita Lydia and recorded by Victor. See Victor Records, 62890, Matrix number R-142. For a note on the popularity that this cuplé had already gained in Madrid, see the anonymous article “Cantos de la Calle” in Nuevo Mundo, no. 753 (January 2, 1908).

274 The lyric content of this entire cuplé, makes evident its sexual innuendo, and thus the preoccupation it raised among the most conservative minds. For full transcribed lyrics see Appendix 8.
lose more than one piece of clothing. Now, as he walked back home, the image of that tiple was only a memory, but by no means less overpowering.

When he arrived at his house, Jiménez felt his body was “itching” to say the least. His wife was already sleeping. He silently undressed and got in bed, but soon found that he was having trouble getting to sleep. The image of the tiple’s body on stage flashed back. Jiménez then recalled the popular weekly postcards being sold at the corner kiosk and thought she was familiar.\(^{275}\) He realized how much he had enjoyed that song, but worse than that, he became aware of how much he had enjoyed the sight of that woman singing it. Remorseful, he turned his eyes to his wife; but she was peacefully sleeping. The sly verses of a second number resounded in his head:

\begin{verbatim}
A la linda Mariquita, le ha comprado su mamá
Un Toribio que la lengua, saca y mete sin cesar
Pero el novio que es celoso, le rompió el juguete
Porque dice que el Toribio… ¡el también lo sabe hacer! \(^{276}\)
To the beautiful Mariquita, her mama has bought
A Toribio [toy] that sticks his mouth in and out
But her boyfriend who is jealous, broke her toy
Because, he says, the toribio he know how to do it too!
\end{verbatim}

Jiménez imagined that tongue in and out. He thought of the Mariquita of the song, and fancied the body of the tiple once again. Why did she move so freely on stage, and so smilingly? What pleasures was that woman capable of? He turned again to his wife and embraced her waist firmly from the back but she hardly moved. Carmela’s calm sleep annoyed him and her indifference even hurt him. He asked himself when or why his wife Carmela had stopped smiling. Could she

\(^{275}\) Modeled after the Spanish practice, a small erotica industry was created in Mexico City around photographs of local vedettes and divas, edited in postcard series that were sold weekly. See for example Carlos Monsiváis, *Celia Montalván: te brindas, voluptuosa e impudente*. (México: Martín Casillas Editores : Cultura-SEP, 1982). Other well-known vedettes during the 1910s and 1920s included Lupe Velez, Mimi Derba, Lupe Rivas Cacho, María Conesa y Prudencia Grifel. For a comprehensive study on the Spanish culture of eroticism in the same period see Maite Zubiaurre, *Cultures of the Erotic in Spain, 1898-1939*. (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2010). I thank Samuel Llano for having referred me to this bibliographic source.

\(^{276}\) Fragment of the lyrics of the “Cuplé del Bastón” from the zarzuela *La Vida Alegre* (1907), this song was recorded by María Conesa in the album “La Gatita Blanca” *op. cit.*
dance like that tiple? When and why had she turned so stiff? He felt bad about his thoughts. His wife was a decent woman, chaste and delicate above all. How did he dare...? Contrite, he left the bed, walked to his desk and decided to release his mind of those treacherous thoughts, by writing his report to the Ayuntamiento office:

The commission has attended the representations and has found that, in effect, they are inconvenient, morally speaking. In my opinion: “May the government have the mercy, in view of the immoral representations in the theater María Guerrero (...) to dictate the corresponding measures, taking into consideration principally the articles 1 and 27 of the Current Theater Regulation.”

To verify his reference was correct, he took the two little blue booklets out of the inside-left pocket of his coat. One of them entitled “Reglamento de Teatros” and the other “Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas.” He unfolded the former and searched for its 27th article. It read:

Art. 27 - When the performance of a piece has started in which modesty is offended, morals are attacked or a specific authority or person is outraged insulted– directly or indirectly by what is done [on stage] --the presiding authority will mandate its suspension, consigning the event to the respective [superior] authorities for the effects that are determined in the Penal Code.

Jiménez knew these regulations well enough to quote them by heart, but was often confused about the contradictions they entailed. He looked into the second booklet and searched the section concerning censorship. The 104th article read:

No authority is authorized to censor or suspend the performance of any theatrical show or to exert official pressure to impede it. All writers and producers of theater pieces enjoy the right of distribution and freedom of thought guaranteed in the Foundational Code of the Republic.

---

277 “La comisión ha ido a las representaciones y ha encontrado que en efecto son inconvenientes moralmente hablando”. Dictamen: “Encarézase el gobierno que en vista de las representaciones inmorales del teatro María Guerrero […] dictar la providencia que corresponda, teniendo en consideración principalmente los artículos primero y 27 del Reglamento de Teatro Vigente.” AHDF- SDP, Vol. 807 File 1320, (February 12, 1912).

278 “Cuando se haya comenzado la representación de una pieza en que se ofenda el pudor, se ataque a la moral o se ultraje a determinada autoridad o persona, directa o indirectamente por dichos hechos, la autoridad que presida mandará suspenderla, consignando el hecho a la autoridad respectiva para los efectos de las disposiciones del Código Penal (1).” Reglamento de Teatros, 1894 (with amendments 1913), 10.

279 This inspector had even requested a government explanation of how to apply penalties for infractions of the official Public Entertainment Regulation. See AHDF- SDP, Vol. 807, File 1325, year 1912.

280 “Ninguna autoridad tiene facultades para censurar ni suspender la representación de ninguna obra teatral, ni para ejercer presión oficial con objeto de impedir aquélla. Todos los escritores y productores de piezas teatrales, disfrutan de
However, the following article supported his claim:

Art. 105 – It is understood that, regardless of the prevision alluded in the previous article, directors and entrepreneurs are responsible before the authorities for attacks on public peace, morality and on private life that may occur in their productions. In cases when a crime against public order is denounced, it is the duty of the municipal president, working with the respective commission, to consign the case to the competent authority.  

Although Gutiérrez often faced trouble in justifying what counted as “attacks on public peace” to the eyes of carpa managers and audiences and even sometimes to himself, he thought that his mention to the immorality of the musical numbers would ensure sanctions on the carpa María Guerrero. After all, it was his job to ensure that theater contributed to the edification of people instead of just providing “decadent” numbers, as press journalists repeatedly warned.

Jiménez looked through the window and smoked a cigar, in the hopes that the azure fumes would calm his anxiety, but somehow he was not feeling better. A few minutes passed. He walked around his living room and then reconsidered his petition. He had enjoyed the show and after all, he thought, how harmful could that be? Other tiplers of the company had smiled at him charmingly at the front door that night. He felt sympathy for those women. He had even seen one of them breastfeeding her baby backstage. He also knew that two of them had kids aged between ten and twelve or thirteen, and he had seen the kids peeping through the holes in the wall of the theater. He reconsidered his petition, trying to be more lenient: “In case of it not being possible to suppress the representations of these zarzuelas, the entrepreneurs should note in their programs and in the
In the coming days Jiménez kept thinking about those adolescents at the backstage of the provisional theater. He thought of them mingling with long-legged and buxom triple in their silvered stockings and shiny underwear. Alarmed, he imagined the same arousal he had felt in his body in the bodies of those young boys, something that, he believed, was much worse!

The apprehension caused by this thought increased with each passing day. This unbearable thought eventually made him change his mind; two days later he wrote a much more drastic report with a much more severe judgment:

Representation of immoral zarzuelas should be prohibited, for they are a school of corruption for the families who, ignoring their plots, attend for entertainment in the company of children that are easily perverted, or in whom the evil is awakened with all its consequences.

Jiménez wrote that last word, and closed his typing machine. That night he slept peacefully.

Apparently, councilor Jiménez was not alone in fearing the effects that the sight of psicalipsis singers could have in the body of young adolescents. A few days later the Ayuntamiento approved

---

283 The proposed solutions to make these shows “for men only” can be found in AHDF- SDP, Vol. 807, File 1320, and as I textually referred in File 1326, (Julio 8, 1912): “En caso de no ser posible suprimir las representaciones de estas zarzuelas, que los empresarios hagan notar en los programas y avisos que se reparten al público, que serán para hombres solos y que se vigilen las puertas de entrada para que no sean admitidos jóvenes menores de edad.”

284 An apprehension about erotic arousal was shared by other officers, who also argued about the effect that the experience of seeing a live performance of the género psicalíptico could have on the bodies of adolescents. A memorandum was presented in 1912 to the Ayuntamiento office with the purpose of “preventing the mistake of allowing young boys to see immoral zarzuelas or plays, capable of exciting at least their nervous systems, or inducing [in them] false ideas about life and its ends.” (Evitar se caiga en el error de consentir que los niños acudan a ver comedias o zarzuelas inmorales, que exciten por lo menos su sistema nervioso o que les inculquen ideas falsas sobre la vida y sus fines). AHDF- SDP - Vol. 807, File 1326, (1912).

285 “Prohíbase la representación de zarzuelas inmorales que son un colegio de corrupción para las familias que ignorantes del argumento de las representaciones, concurren a divertirse en unión de niños que fácilmente se pervierten ó hacen nacer en ellos la malicia con todas sus consecuencias.” AHDF-SDP, Vol. 807, File 1322, (1912).

286 Michael Foucault pointed out the fears that towards the end of the 19th century in France, — were awakened by the realization that children masturbated. Excessive attention to adolescent sexuality, he argued, led to increased concern for analyzing, policing, controlling and prosecuting young bodies in arousal; something that led in turn to the intensification of adult desire for, or concern about, their own bodies. See Michel Foucault, “Pouvoir-corps” in Quel Corps, No.2 September 1975, (2-5): 3.
his petition. As a result, the carpa María Guerrero was put under stricter supervision than other carpas. The presence of councilors and inspectors in this theater was so customary, that people unrelated to the Ayuntamiento office tried to secure free entrance to the carpas by arguing that they were inspectors. These incidents were promptly reported by managers to the Office of Entertainment for due action.287

Visits of inspectors to the carpas must have been so frequent that in the long term they became good acquaintances with the company’s members, and hence in some cases, probably more lenient. This friendly rapport even included the teenagers they hoped to protect.288 The presence of figures of authority did not necessarily put an end to the infamous zarzuelas. Instead, being their most assiduous attendants, inspectors became increasingly fond of this musical repertory. Or so is suggested by allegations from carpa managers, accusing inspectors who no longer worked for the Ayuntamiento Office of still demanding free entrance to the shows.289

In 1912 Mexico City’s governors eagerly aspired to make the capital city look like Paris or Berlin by emulating their coffee shops, shopping centers, fashion, dances and cabaret; however, they were not entirely willing to accept a Parisian degree of moral relaxation among the dwellers of Mexico City. The reports and sanctions on the Teatro Apolo and the teatro-carpa María Guerrero suggest that the press as much as local authorities closely monitored these venues of public entertainment due to their reputation for being sites originating “social scandals.” And yet, the


288 Oral histories left behind by some carpa actors reveal the ensuing closeness between councilors and inspectors and children who worked at the carpas. I have addressed this topic in chapter one.

289 Upon notification of such fraudulent action, the Office of Public Entertainment confiscated the expired identity cards of inspectors who had been already dismissed. AHDF, SDP- Vol. 810, File 1560 (1920-1922). Similarly the Chief of Public Entertainment addressed a note to the Dirección de Intervenciones Fiscales (Tax Office) notifying that Inspectors should be allowed free entrance ONLY to those shows that they were to supervise, and not to any other show. AHDF, SDP- Vol. 812, File 1680, (1922).
“noise” in itself was probably only an index of a bigger concern about the rapid social changes the society was undergoing in fin-de-siècle Mexico.

The alarming presence of women in nightly shows stands as a turning point in the sonic culture of that era. By articulating desire and sexual pleasure through singing, dance, staged music and the development of a local industry of erotic entertainment tiples, or couple singers (cupletistas), disclosed the double standards of Porfirian society. The sexual innuendos that cupletistas implied through pauses, silences and movements while performing, may have triggered the imagination of among audience members and, perhaps, their guilty pleasures. The escándalos provoked by these women confronted the most conservative sectors with undesirable practices of leisure, forcing them to acknowledge that, after all, music was not “the most spiritual of arts” but that it entailed and connected the bodies of both the performer and the listener. This not only demonstrated an “inferior” degree of spiritual elevation, with respect to that purported by German idealism, but also increased the ideological tensions reigning in Mexico City before and during the Revolution.

Although the anxiety that erotic musical theater provoked among the Mexican elites was not unique to Mexico, it was intensified by the political context. Oscillating between the public and the private spheres, experienced discursively or physically, the perceived crisis of morality happened along with the exhaustion of Díaz’s administration, and it was to some extent indicative of its imminent demise. Through performance, embodied musical experience and embodied listening, the couplets and “immoral zarzuelas” in theaters and carpas articulated the desire for a rupture with the constrictive morality of the Porfírian regime. They introduced noise to both the body and society. Be it the conservative’s complaints about the género chico in the press, the progressive’s celebrations of it, or the inspectors’ attempt to control the psycho-emotional effect of this musical genre on their own bodies and the bodies of others, this music caused a crisis of morality which was
consequential to how the Capitalinos experienced music on stage, to how they lived in their bodies, and to how they perceived the bodies of others.

**Morality in the Margins of Downtown: Remembrance of a Night**

After revising this section, I come out of the Archive. I walk through the neighborhood northbound, to the street of República de Cuba. I remember a night, years ago, when I went bar hopping with a friend, and casually entered what was, clearly to me at the time, a working-class gay salsa club. As we were told that night, the Cantinita El 33, just steps away from Eje Central and República de Perú, offered live sex shows. A little further West is a small door, with no label, through which I came in on that same night to the sound of the chicha-techno-pop “Israel” sung by Delfín, Wendy Zulca and La Tigresa del Oriente, all of whom are Andean working-class musical celebrities. To middle and upper class Mexicans, their music stands as an unequivocal sign of “kitsch.” Inside the club that night, I looked up to a loft in the second floor where a male stripper indifferently moved. Making my way through the audience, mostly made up of young males in their early twenties, I heard the cheerful crowd celebrating the unabashed live masturbation of the dancer.

Years have passed since that night and today, more distrustful of my own assumptions than I have ever been before, I ask my self if the so called “poor classes” are indeed more “dissolute” than the rest or rather, the supposed “modesty” of the middle and upper classes is just an euphemism for not accepting or displaying their sexual instincts.

**Arturo Lobato’s Case: The Ear in the Body**

The Cine Alcazar, in the barrio Peralvillo just a few blocks north of downtown, was in the post-Revolutionary period normally a place to watch recent films brought from the US, but its manager
had asked permission to transform it into a musical variety theater. The night of March 17, 1922 was an eventful one for this newly transformed venue for live performance, as Don Arturo Lobato, a man in the audience, was summoned to the Ayuntamiento office due to his demeanor in the show. Apparently, it had all started with a rumba number. The inspector in charge, Don Hipólito Amor described the events:

During the second part of the variety show, all the audience in the salon noticed the poor comportment of one of the attendants to the spectacle who was at the left side, sitting not in his seat, but on the edge of the stage. The conduct of this man became more and more marked, to the extent that in the last number of the variety show, which was the dance of a rumba, his manners, markedly immoral, forced me to order him to be taken out of the salon and conducted to the sixth police station, [and] consigned to the major [presidente municipal] to receive due punishment, since, as I have already said, his behavior was completely notorious and commented upon by the audience.

Although inspector Amor was never explicit about the gestures or actions he considered “markedly immoral”, he was extremely preoccupied about the fact that the audience commented upon Lobato’s conduct. Seemingly, the “poor comportment” of Don Arturo, the “immorality” within it, was deemed as such by Amor due to its discrepancy with the rules of etiquette prescribed at the Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas. As the hundred-and-tenth article of these regulations stated:

Art. 110.- The spectators will maintain during the spectacle the silence, composure and circumspection inherent to a civilized audience. Whoever makes any noisy manifestation of any kind during the performance will be expelled from the salon without any right to claim remuneration. The manifestations of pleasure or disgust by the audience will not be considered interruptions, unless they are of such nature as to produce tumult or real alteration to the order, or constitute failures of culture or morals.

290 During these years it was common practice that some house owners requested permits to transform their film houses into variety show venues, so popular they were. By year 1921, this movie theater was reported to be located in Av. República de Chile, 31. AHDF- SDP, Vol. 808, File 1391, (1921).

291 “Durante la segunda parte de los actos de variedad, fue notada por todo el público que asistió al salón, la falta de corrección de uno de los asistentes al espectáculo que se encontraba en las laterales de la izquierda, sentado no en su asiento, sino a la orilla del tablado del foro. La actitud de este individuo fue acentuándose cada vez más, al grado que en el último número de la variedad, que fue el baile de una rumba, sus ademanes, marcadamente inmorales, me obligaron a ordenar fuera sacado del salón y conducido a la sexta demarcación de policía, consignado al presidente municipal, para su debido castigo, pues como ya he dicho, su proceder fue completamente notorio y comentado por el público.” AHDF-SDP: Vol. 3924, File 36.

292 “Los espectadores guardarán durante el espectáculo el silencio, la compostura y la circumspección inherentes a un público civilizado. El que hiciere manifestaciones ruidosas de cualquiera clase durante una función teatral será expulsado del salón sin reintegrarle el importe de su localidad. No se entenderá por interrupción, las manifestaciones de agrado o desagrado
Interestingly, the regulation does not appeal to good taste or refinement, but rather to the decorum the audience was supposed to demonstrate through their capability to remain quiet, as silence and circumspection would bespeak their civility. The problem therefore seems to have resided not in Lobato’s conduct itself, nor in whatever bodily movements he might have made while listening to the rumba, but rather on the effect that his actions had on the rest of the audience, which then “noticed” and “commented” on it. While the report does not explicitly state it, it is probable that Lobato was dancing, for after all he was “sitting not in his seat but in the edge of the stage,” hence closer to the sound source and perhaps more likely to have reacted physically to the music. If this were indeed the case his movements, silent themselves, would have probably been less a reason for concern than the noise he provoked among other members of the audience. Even if he made sounds while dancing – for example by tapping on the floor, clapping or voicing – it is unlikely that these sounds were louder than the rumba drums, nor is it likely that his body was moving more ostentatiously than that of the woman on stage; neither could he have had on fewer clothes than she did. As considered by the 110th article of the Regulation, Lobato’s reaction – dancing or not – could well have been just a demonstration of his bodily pleasure but, because others responded sonically to this, inspector Amor considered his behavior as a “manifestation” conducive to “tumult” and an “alteration of the order,” and hence deserving detention. As it seems to be the case, the sonic reaction of the audience to his movements represented at least as much of a threat as whatever Lobato was actually doing.”

What could have been so provocative about the dance? I think of the rumba’s relentless periodicity, its organizational structure built on percussive and repetitive rhythms. I recall academic debate over the power of repetitive dancing to induce a state of “trance” and “altered processes of hechas por el público, a menos que llegasen a ser de tal naturaleza, que produjeran tumulto o verdadera alteración del orden o constituyeran faltas a la cultura y la moral.” [Italics are mine]. Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas, 16. “Art. 110.
I imagine Lobato immersed in dance-induced pleasure and oblivious to his surroundings. I think of what could have made Lobato’s body to move in such a way that Amor interpreted it as “immoral.” I envision the man so enticed by the sight of the woman performer’s dancing to the music that he could limit himself to simply staring. What could have been so captivating about those sounds or moves that he needed to come closer to the stage, instead of remaining seated with the rest? Would the comments from other people in the audience have been disapproving, or rather celebratory? Where his actions just vicarious manifestations of what no one else dared to do? Further, what was it in the music that joined them as a single acoustic community? What dangers did inspectors perceived in the ‘musicking’ done at this venue that night?

Lobato’s offense seems to have consisted in doing something of which he was not explicitly accused. The cause of trouble seems to rely on the pressures that his deviant model of aurality brought to bear on the dominant model of listening. His listening modality clearly connected hearing with the rest of the body that makes it possible. Therefore Lobato’s way of listening was threatening to aspirations for the “civilized subject” that the elites connected to a composed, meditative or circumspect listening.

---

293 Ruth Herbert has contributed a revision of how the term “trance” has been dealt with in anthropological and ethnomusicological literature. She argues that, as a perceptual phenomenon, “trance” has been interpreted as a result of the interaction between mind and cultural contexts, but she points out that the phenomenon has been mostly studied for its connections with communal and religious ritual. With recourse to music psychology instead of ethnomusicology, she thus argues in favor of greater academic consideration of “secular” trance and for the study of what she calls, “solitary musical involvement in daily life,” something that she characterizes as “low-arousal ‘trophotropic’ trance. In her observations, subjects experienced “changes in attentional focus, arousal, sensory awareness, experience of time, thought processes and sense of self.” Such reactions were considered by these individuals to be part of their everyday musical experiences. Herbert, Ruth “Reconsidering Music and Trance: Cross-cultural Differences and Cross-disciplinary Perspectives” Ethnomusicology Forum 20, no. 2, (2011): 213.

294 Judith Becker described the term “trancing” as a non-discrete process. Dance induced movement, she claim, can lead to an altered perception of time that is experienced as a “larger” state; in other words, the state of “trance consciousness,” Judith Baker, Deep Listeners: Music, Emotion, and Trancing. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004),11.

The Racial Dynamics of the Rumba

Yet still, Lobato did not enthusiastically react to just any music, but to a rumba, which represented a greater complication. Just as the erotic cuplés of the género chico disrupted the roles typically prescribed for women, so too the rumba danced in the city disrupted preconceived ideas about race. Lobato’s case introduces the problem of a corporality associated with a dance closely connected with black people in the Americas, and most specifically with black Cubans.

Despite its many appropriations by non-blacks in the American continent, writings on the rumba have preserved, and even cultivated, an imaginary around this dance’s African origin. Cuban musicologist Fernando Ortiz wrote in 1951 that, when danced in the streets and villages of Cuba, the rumba was an example of transculturation, symbolic of ancient African rites. When danced by Cubans of African descent, he maintained, the rumba became a pantomime of amorous courtship. In Cuban theater, however, Ortíz claimed that the rumba was appropriated by “criollos who wanted to show erudition,” and therefore dissociated from its former context of secular ritualty. According to Ortiz, the staged rumba often resulted in “one of the many degenerations of the Afro-Cuban dance invented to please the vices of tourists, thus losing the grace of mimicry that was so typical of original Cuban rumba.”

For his part, when discussing the use of rumba in Cuban theater performances, Robin Moore concurs with Ortíz in the assertion that the theatrical rumba was adapted from the streets and then transposed to theatrical settings, where it served as a marker of both race and social class.


297 Most likely Ortíz was referring to the theatrical rumba of the 1940s and 1950s, which became most popular during the years of Fulgencio Batista’s presidency (1940-1944) and during his later dictatorship (1952-1959). It was during these years that Havana became a top entertainment destination for US American tourists. Ortiz, 330. Earlier, the first rumba crazes to crossover to the U.S. came in the late 1920s. See Robin Moore, *Nationalizing Blackness: Afro Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

Moore explains that the presentation of the rumba at the end of the bufos cubanos, (a type of traveling variety show very much like the Mexican carpas), was a plot device that facilitated resolution of conflict. Scholars have claimed that it was through these bufos cubanos that the rumba, along with other Cuban genres, arrived in Mexico in the late nineteenth century, via port cities such Tampico, Mérida and Veracruz.\textsuperscript{299}

By the 1920’s the rumba had gained considerable public acclaim in Mexico City. But its reception was embedded in the political agenda of the post-revolution, especially insofar as it concerned the different racial hierarchies on which the myth of national identity was grounded. Therefore, the association of the rumba with African and Cuban blacks had both racial and, in the worst case, racist implications. In 1928, an article titled “Modern art: Artistic Afro-Cubanism” was published in Revista de Revistas, the weekly supplement of the Mexican newspaper Excélsior. The author was Martí Cassanovas, a Catalan-born and Cuba-based art critic.\textsuperscript{300} His article, richly illustrates the ideas that this dance invoked among the elites in the context of nation formation, as well as the foundational racism that lingered in among the privileged social groups of postcolonial Mexico and in other postcolonial territories of the continent.

Cuban musical folklore is one of the richest in America due to the variety of its rhythms […] It is possible the [folklore] that offers, among the countries of our continent […] the example of the purest and most sustained persistence of its African origins, perpetuating itself without degeneration or mixture through generations. This is understandable: today, despite the frequent and increasingly accentuated racial crossing more than a third of the Cuban population is black African […] this ratio prevails and perpetuates ancestral costumes and traditions allowing these customs of African origin to


\textsuperscript{300} Martí Casanovas (1894-1966) was known in Mexico for his alignment with the mural movement in Mexico. Publishing in many avant-garde Latin American magazines in the 1920s, his art criticism suggests that Casanova was participating in a broader debate about the values of European avant-gardism and abstraction, as compared with American indigenous sources in the creation of a progressive and modern American art.
remained and with them the Afro Cuban music, reproducing itself within its own milieu and in its own environment, preserving itself pure and presenting a strong and impenetrable resistance to all influence. Therefore, the most typical and characteristic Cuban genres, the *son* and the *rumba*, are entirely of African origin and keep themselves pure, providing a unique tone to the musical folklore of America. Perhaps it has been its simplicity – for the rumba is only the indefinite repetition of eight bars →, that has contributed to preserving its purity. […] Its lyrics and choruses are markedly vulgar and the maracas and bongos, African instruments, continue to be used. It can be thus explained that, while the *danzón* – a successor of the contradanza and the danza [and] a criollo product of unmistakable Cuban physiognomy and character – constantly loses its place in the face of other imported dances, the *rumba* and the *son* preserve their positions, standing as representatives of Cuban musical nationalism. It is natural that, as the heir and perpetuator of entirely primitive forms of civilization, […] the Cuban negro does not produce, in any other domains of human activity, cultural manifestations that can be considered as belonging to its African origins and blood. […] The Cuban negro, in effect, constitutes within the Cuban [society] confused and without a shape of its own, the only truly local note. Needless to say, Cuban aesthetic nationalism has to have recourse to this source, and have as its most important content the element of black traditions: Just so as in the continental countries of America, the Indian offers a rich source of artistic culture and tradition, so too in Cuba it is blackness [*negrada*] which offers a distinctive and characteristic tone.301 [Italics mine].

The above article offers a clear example of what Ochoa Gautier, following Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs, has termed “acoustic epistemologies of purification.” Exploring the binary of the “sonic/aural” in postcolonial Latin America, Ochoa has characterized the aural public sphere as a dialogic struggle between forces of regionalization and centralism. In her view, practices of “sonic recontextualization” are conducive to a process she calls “purification of aurality” whereby certain

---

301 “El folklore musical cubano [es] uno de los más ricos de América por la variedad de sus ritmos, […] es posiblemente el que ofrece en los países de nuestro continente, […] el caso de la persistencia más pura y sostenida de sus orígenes africanos, perpetuándose sin degenerar y mixtificarse a través de las generaciones. Se explica que sea así: hoy, aún, pese a los frecuentes y cada día más acentuados cruces raciales, más del tercio de la población cubana es negra africana […] esta proporción se sostiene y perpetúa por ancestralismo sus costumbres y tradiciones, […] permitiendo que esas costumbres de ascendencia africana, y con ellas la música afrocubana, puedan producirse dentro de su medio propio y de su ambiente, conservándose puras y oponiendo, […] una fuerte e impenetrable resistencia a toda influencia. Así, los aires más típicos y característicos de la música cubana, el son y la rumba, son de orígenes netamente africanos y aún hoy se mantienen puros, dando una nota única en América, dentro del folklore musical. Tal vez por sus misma simplicidad, pues la rumba es solo la repetición indefinida de ocho compases, ha contribuido a mantener su pureza, […] sus letras o estribillos son marcadamente populacheros, y los bongos y maracas, instrumentos africanos, siguen usándose. […] Se explica así que, mientras el danzón, que es sucesor de la contradanza y la danza, producto criollo, de fisonomía y caracteres cubanos inconfundibles, pierda incesantemente terreno frente a otros bailes de importación, la rumba y el son mantengan sus posiciones quedando como representativos del nacionalismo musical cubano. Natural es que, heredero y continuador de formas de civilización completamente primitivas, […] el negro cubano no produce, en ninguno [otro] de los órdenes de la actividad humana, manifestaciones que puedan considerarse como propias de su sangre y su ascendencia Africana […] El negro cubano, en efecto, constituye dentro del conglomerado cubano, confuso y sin relieve propio, la única nota propiamente local[…]. No falta quien afirme que el nacionalismo estético cubano tiene que acudir como fuente, y tener como contenido sustantivo el elemento y las tradiciones negras: así como en los países continentales americanos el indio ofrece un rico caudal de cultura y tradición artísticas, en Cuba es la negrada la que ofrece una nota propia y característica.” Martí Casanovas, “Arte Moderno: Afro cubanismo Artístico” in *Revista de Revistas*, (February 19, 1928) s/r.
music or sounds have been associated with ideas of the “pure” and “traditional,” in opposition to those interpreted as “cosmopolitan” or “modern.” As Ochoa argues, this process is possible thanks to the different enactments, discursive or otherwise, seeking to “provincialize sounds in order to ascribe them a place in the modern ecumene.”302 Such enactments, whose outcome is often unexpected, lead to validation and legitimization of certain sounds. However, the crisis of agency comes in cases when different people do not have equal opportunities to validate the sounds particular to their cultures.

Casanovas’ investment in the project of endorsing an “authentic” American modern art has led him to assert that, in its process of transculturation to Cuba, the rumba has “resisted all cultural influences” and has thus remained “pure.” It therefore constitutes the best sonic raw material in the conformation of the “characteristic” Cuban national music. Furthermore, Casanovas sustains that the Cuban negro is incapable of producing anything authentic in other domains of cultural activity. Therefore, the rumba inextricably connects the Cuban negro with “entirely primitive forms of civilization.”

When published in Mexico, the authoritative voice of this Spanish art critic thus legitimized the provincialization of the rumba and of indigenous musical traditions; the implication was that they were the only means by which American art could reach an identity of its own. In Mexico opinions such as that of Casanovas contributed to shaping reductionist and essentialist views of Africanness and, concomitantly, of blackness in the American continent. If such essentialist speech was characteristic among early twentieth-century Spanish intellectuals, this rhetorical turn was also very prominently used among Mexican intellectuals, who projected blackness onto Cuba and the Caribbean in order to exclude the African cultural root from the myth of Mexican national identity,

and thus create a narrative of the mestizaje based on an exclusively indigenous-Spanish dichotomy.\(^\text{303}\)

But beyond simply historicizing it as an episode in the history of Spanish, Cuban and Mexican mentalities, I want to point out that Casanovas’ implied belief on the existence of “civilized” and “primitive” races stands here as an example of the “colonized subjectivities,” the pernicious and long lasting effects of the colonial project in its entirety, theorized by Aníbal Quijano. The resulting syllogism –simplistic as it is pernicious – that black albeit “pure” is essentially “primitive” and, also by implication, inferior, classified people and structured social life at large in colonial and postcolonial Latin America. As a result, the worth of the rumba was by no means conceived on the basis of its aesthetic or musical value (it was “too simple”), but rather on that of its capability to preserve a tradition and provide a “local color” \(vis à vis\) the hispanic criollo culture or the European avant-garde. Extending this view to “Indian cultures” as Casanovas proposes, the social interactions (and asymmetric division of sonic labor) between the Mexican modernist composers and traditional musicians was clearly established. Because the 1920s was a decade when both Mexico and the recently emancipated Cuba (and all countries in the American continent for that matter) were constructing their national identities, one can see how the reception of the rumba transited from being a stigmatized black, ritual dance to become an emblem of the “pure” and “primitive” Cuban national identity.\(^\text{304}\)

\(^{303}\) Numerous studies were carried out in Cuba in an attempt to demonstrate the inferiority of black people. The intellectual lineage of these studies as well as the underlying political interest in the context of the Cuban emancipation from Spain have been recounted by Madrid and Moore, \textit{Danzón}, 77-78. These authors have also discussed how the influence of black cultures was excluded in the Mexican narratives of mestizaje (106-116). For his part, Moore has defended how blackness was used to construct the myth of Cuban national identity. See Robin Moore, \textit{Nationalizing Blackness: Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940}. Pittsburgh, Pa: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997.

\(^{304}\) As a recently emancipated country, the fate of Cuba was a matter of public debate and certainly one of special interest for the literate population in the rest of the former Hispanic colonies the Americas, most saliently because the case of Cuba would set precedents for possible intervention of the US in the continent. One example of this concern is illustrated by another article published by the same source and describing the “economic and political crisis” affecting the island. José Elguero, “El problema de Cuba” in \textit{Revista de Revistas}, (27 August, 1922).
Lobato’s detention happened in 1922, six years before Casanovas’ article on the rumba as folklore was published in the *Revista de Revistas*. Yet I am inclined to believe that associations of the Cuban rumba with ideas of the “primitive African black” predated the article. This is especially likely at a time when authorities had a biased, and inaccurate, belief that black people in Mexico City were mostly foreigners. This was also a time when Mexico received more migrants from Cuba than from any other nation in the Hispanic Americas. Because some of these Cuban migrants were black, the rhetorical uses had them as a synecdoche to represent all Cuban migration.\(^3^{06}\)

Lobato’s reaction to rumba dancing in the Cine Alcazar was threatening because, among other reasons, he was unable to restrain his body from reacting to an “Afro-Antillean” dance; therefore this man could not, (or worse, would not) comply with the behavior that corresponded to “a civilized audience.” This in turn would have compromised the status quo of the audience altogether.\(^3^{06}\) Yet, oral histories and retrospective accounts make me believe that the audience at this small theater did not care much for the status quo.\(^3^{07}\) Possibly then, Lobato’s dance could have provoked not the rejection but the enthusiasm of the rest of the audience.

Elisabeth LeGuin and other scholars in the area of performance studies have argued that ‘kinetic traditions’ determine our experiences as listeners, thus conditioning our ‘sensible receptions’

\(^{305}\) The population census practiced in Mexico in the 1920s (but not published until 1932 by post-revolutionary governments), reveals that after migration from the US—which conformed the majority of foreign immigration—, migration to Mexico was mainly by Spanish speakers from Spain and Cuba, with a peak of Cuban migrants in the year 1923, when the number of people coming from the Caribbean island (5520 men and women) was twice that of those coming from Spain (2447). As for the race by which incomers were identified by Mexican authorities, registers of the years 1925, 1926 and 1927 indicate that 57 blacks were registered as Mexicans, but 256 as foreigners in 1925; 15 black Mexicans versus 48 black foreigners in 1926; and 17 black Mexicans versus 135 black foreigners in 1927. It is very revealing of the racial politics of the post-revolutionary state that while “black” was considered a racial term used to identify migrants, it was not used in the census as a group to draw statistic about the Mexican population. This is most startling when phenotypic features associated with the “black race” are clearly present among people from states such as Veracruz, Yucatán and Guerrero. See Departamento de Estadística Nacional, *Anuario de 1930* (México D.F.: Gobierno de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos, 1932), “Sección VII- Migración”, 153-160 and “Clasificación por raza y por nacionales y extranjeros”, 162.

\(^{306}\) For an account of the contempt that members of the Mexican elite groups expressed for the rumba, see chapter Two of this dissertation.

\(^{307}\) I will make a much more extensive use of such oral histories in chapters Four and Five.
Therefore, certain movements, facial gestures, linguistic accents, theatrical inflexions, may all account for how the audience heard the music. As LeGuin demonstrates, what is seen, including dance as well as pictorial depictions, plays an important role in shaping both kinetic traditions and sonic perception. In all likelihood, the dancing of this rumba evoked associations with black people. How Capitalinos imagined those black people in terms of their social class merits further discussion.

Only ten months before Lobato’s detention, the weekly magazine Revista de Revistas had published the image of a black couple dancing the rumba on its cover. Because the Revista de Revistas was published every Sunday, image would have been seen by anyone who bought the newspaper that Sunday morning.

---

Dressed in impeccable white outfits and wearing shiny patent-leather shoes—his with spats—man and woman smile at each other with dazzling teeth. Their eyes are concealed (hers because they are closed and his by a hat) thus conferring a greater sense of anonymity to the characters. With tiptoeing feet and arched legs, the man’s pelvis is slightly lifted. The woman is curving her upper body from the hips while gently rubbing her shoulders with a pink handkerchief in a clear teasing
gesture. In the background, a band of equally smiling black musicians in tuxedos can be seen and, I would say, almost heard: piano, violin, timbales and a wind instrument -- perhaps a soprano sax, or a trumpet -- complete the sonic image.

This colored illustration by cartoonist Ernesto García Cabral was most likely a representation of one of the many Cuban entertainment companies that traveled from Havana to Mexico in the early 1920s. As the setting and their outfits suggest, these musicians and dancers were depicted as the indisputable protagonists of the shows that were in vogue in the Caribbean island, and which tourists from as far away as New York craved to attend. The attractive image of this dance orchestra made up of sophisticated black musicians, elegantly dressed and in full artistic mastery, conveyed the idea that the rumba was a widespread and desirable practice, definitely and markedly cosmopolitan.  

This image clearly conflicted with stereotypical representations of the disenfranchised black that had been common in Mexico since colonial times, not to mention with Casanovas’ construction of the rumba as primitive.

The growing public acceptance of such racialized music genres was part of a larger process of the “whitening” of these musics ongoing in other Caribbean countries.  

---

309 Susan Cook has made a case on how the recording industry in the first decade of the 20th century marketed the ragtime as a case of a racialized dance-music appropriated for white use, and hence depicted as a desirable social practice. The ragtime included a broad range of musical rhythms such as cake-walk, march, two-step, slow-drag, and other “generic labels that clearly embed the music with movement and dance.” See “Talking Machines, Dancing Bodies: marketing recorded dance music before World War I,” in Sherril Dodds and Susan C. Cook. *Bodies of Sound: Studies Across Popular Music and Dance.* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013),150. Due to the presence of American recording companies in Mexico City in the years 1920s it is highly likely that the marketing of these racialized genres also influenced how the rumba and other dances were perceived by the public in the Mexican capital in the early 1920s.

since the 1910s – was not as problematic as it had formerly been.\textsuperscript{311} What is more, the juxtaposition of “high” culture evoked by tuxedos also crafted an attractive model of the cosmopolitan subject. The collective impact of this image was probably something that, even if subconsciously, the publishers of Revista de Revistas may have tried to revert six years later by publishing Casanovas’ article “Arte Moderno: Afro Cubanismo Artístico.” Diametrically opposed to such cosmopolitan appeal of the rumba, the fact that his views were published in the same magazine years later, suggests the conflicting views this dance continued spurring among the Capitalino society.

Lobato’s body in dance therefore condenses the cultural tensions that gradually conformed the uses of the body permitted for a certain group of people, while not for others. Although Lobato’s ethnic background or skin color is not traceable, it is highly probable that he was either a mestizo or a white man, two of the “unmarked” ethnic groups in México City at the time. (Had he been an Indian or black man, most likely the officer would have mentioned it). The risk entailed in Lobato appropriating, dancing and, most likely, enjoying Afro-American dances, was that it conferred visibility on the cultural influence of black culture in the city. It therefore conflicted with symbolic construction of the urban “civilized” subject, ongoing since Porfirian times.\textsuperscript{312}

As Martí Casanovas explained in his article, the Cuban rumba had contributed to the Island’s local identity. As he noticed too, Mexico underwent an analogous path to building its national identity. As Madrid and Moore explained, the danzón in Yucatán for example was not associated with black people but with the white Cuban elites of the nineteenth century. See Madrid and Moore, Danzón, 92.

\textsuperscript{311} The different racial imaginaries in different countries (and in cases even from one city to the other) was another important element in both, the marketing of these musical genres as well as their reception in live performances. As Madrid and Moore explained, the danzón in Yucatán for example was not associated with black people but with the white Cuban elites of the nineteenth century. See Madrid and Moore, Danzón, 92.

\textsuperscript{312} Concern for the influence of afro-Caribbean culture can be traced back to Porfirian times and when, shortly after the emancipation of Cuba, Díaz showed a clear interest in how Cuban authorities had regulated the expansion of racially marked dance-music. The political emancipation of Cuba from Spain at the end of the nineteenth century prompted Díaz’ interest in the Cuban Regulation of Public Entertainment for comparative purposes. As a document issued in Mexico City in 1891 indicates, “The Ministry of Governance refers the new legislation on theaters published in the island of Cuba” (AHDF-SDP, Vol. 804, Exp. 811, 1891). The topic was relevant because this would determine in turn certain public policies that were crucial for the kind of nation Díaz wanted to build in terms of ethnic representation. Elsewhere I have developed an argumentation of what this interest might have entailed for Díaz’ political agenda and for his foreign policies with both Cuba and Spain. See Natalia Bieletto Bueno, “Teatro musical itinerante: hacia un diálogo transnacional,” Boletín Música Casa de las Américas. No. 35, (Jul-Dec, 2013): 45-70.
identity on the myth of the fusion of the great pre-hispanic Indian civilizations and the criollo—a narrative in which the so-called “primitive” black had no role to play. This illustrates the ways in which black culture and its influence were debased through urban practices. This form of social violence against black cultural expressions was one of many strategies by which the Mexican government, through the ideology of the mestizaje, contributed to shaping the social hierarchies necessary to assure governability in the post-Revolutionary context.313

Because Lobato’s dancing aroused a sonic turmoil among other people in the audience, it unleashed the possibility of an escándalo thus also awakening the inspector’s alarm. As Jacques Attali observed, “noise is a concern of power; when power founds its legitimacy on the power it inspires [through regulation, disciplining and punishment], on its capacity to create social order, on its univocal monopoly of violence, it monopolizes noise.”314 Therefore, by having the privilege to distinguish “music” from “noise” (escándalos), Mexican authorities and intellectual figures of authority, determined the boundaries of the primitive and the modern, the acceptable and the unacceptable. And while this power may have helped to perpetuate the racist colonial structures, there were also clear cases of social disobedience. As Attali also acknowledged, noise is a weapon for resistance: “noise had always been experienced as destruction, disorder, dirt, pollution, an aggression against the code-structuring messages.” For Attali, “noise” is the breakage of the extant social order and a hence a simulacrum of a murder, which in this case can be read as a murder of the Porfirian past: certainly one that was much desired by Mexican society at large.

Not surprisingly, the urge to punish Lobato’s disorder proved to be not so pressing for inspector Amor after all. As the rest of the report reveals, later that night Lobato’s friends interceded

313 Examples of the advancement of the ideology of mestizaje can be verified in the local press too. Contrasting with the description of the “primitiveness” of the rumba, a musical view about Mexican indigenous music, projected “authenticity”, “purity” and “originality” to Mexican traditional sones. See Xavier Sorondo, “La música de nuestros aborígenes” in Revista de Revistas, (Septiembre 7, 1930).

314 Attali, Noise, 27.
and identified him. Inspector Amor acknowledged his acquaintance with the Lobato family, and said that, “he wanted to avoid them any grief.” Arturo Lobato -- suddenly disclosed as the son of a “decent” family -- was pardoned, dismissed and sent home.\footnote{“Soon after, several young men who accompanied the person detained [Lobato] at the spectacle, presented themselves to the [commissary] to intercede so that he was let free, promising amends, [a petition] which could not possibly be granted; but, because I learned that the detained young person was Mr. Arturo Lobato, a person who given special circumstances I can introduce any time to this Superiority, I allowed myself to offer those who advocated for him that, under formal oath he presented himself to the authorities indicated, [and] he would be allowed to spend the night at home, in order to avoid any grief to his family. Having notified him [Lobato] of all these [measures] [and having previously taken required records] of the case, he retired himself to his address.” AHDF-SDP: Vol. 3924, File 36. (Poco después se presentaron al salón varios jóvenes que acompañaban al consignado en el espectáculo, a interceder para que se le dejara en libertad, prometiendo enmienda, a lo que no era posible acceder; mas como me enterara de que el joven detenido era el Sr. Arturo Lobato, persona que por circunstancias especiales, me es posible presentarle en cualquier momento a la Superioridad, me permití ofrecer a los que por él abogaban que bajo promesa formal de presentarse ante la Autoridad que se le indicara, podía permitirle que pasara la noche en su casa, a fin de evitar una pena a sus familiares. Dado a conocer lo anterior al interesado y previos los requisitos del caso, se retiró a su domicilio).} Notwithstanding the offense, the acquaintance between Inspector Amor and the Lobato family illustrates that the relations of sociability between the authorities and the people who attended the carpas shows sometimes resulted in more lenient treatment. It appears that shared musical experience at the variety shows eluded the official discourses of racial difference, and instead contributed to integrating everyone in a single community of listeners who were beginning to embrace the new codes suggested by the “noise” of the new dances.

**The City in my Ear**

My day of research is nearly over. It is five o’clock and the archive is closing. I walk to the Allende subway station to take the Metro back home. I board the train at the same time that a CD vendor hops on. He is one of many sellers that anyone using the city’s Metro will find in every trip. These music traders are locally called “bocineros” due to the powerful speakers (bocinas) they carry in their backpacks. Their job is to sell pirated copies of the most treasured songs, be they emerging hits or from the canon of Mexican and international popular music. I glimpse a seat that has been
freed, seat myself, and, with great efforts to ignore the loud music coming from his backpack, take my tablet out of my purse and search for the PDF of a scholarly article:

There is perhaps no stronger behavior to unite humans than coordinated rhythmic movement. This is possible because humans have the capacity to become entrained with one another or with external stimulus (...) in sport, play, verbal communication emotional expression and in the epitome of rhythmic entrainment: music and dance. These kinds of activities are powerful, perhaps because they indicate a mutual perceptual and social experience originating from the sharing in time and space of embodied rhythm […] The ability to entrain to an external auditory pulse or complex rhythm enables multiple individuals to time-lock their behavior by integrating information across different sensory modalities.316

So here we were: a cumbia-entrained orange wagon full of foot-tapping passengers who, either enjoying or despising the repetitive beat, instantly became all part of the same acoustic community. Heading south of the city along the old Calzada de Tlalpan Avenue, and trapped within the same enclosed sonic space, I am engulfed by the loud reggaeton music that has vexed so many scholarly minds.

I am still thinking of Lobato and the people who visited the theater-jacalón Alcázar that night in 1922. Thinking of the social harm that the sound of the Afro-Antillean dance could have represented at the time, I cannot but draw analogies between this orange train and the rumba-entrained theater. We will never know what motivated the boisterous response from the people at the theater who that night could not stop watching the “enrumbed” body of Lobato on stage. But certainly, the escándalo that night accounted for a multi-sensorial and memorable collective experience, one that might have made more than one audience member feel part of the same group. Why or how this was “dangerous” was something that inspector Amor sensed, but that even he was unable to state explicitly.

* * *

Sonic Control in the City: Present and Past

Two years have passed since the period of my daily visits to the archive. Just as in the early twentieth century the no-sound of order was the sound of modesty and progress, today official concern for controlling sound in the City responds to an interest in its international image, as tourism has become one of its principal sources of income. In 2013, senators from the Party for National Action (PAN) – a conservative party in the City’s Congress – proposed an Acoustic Law of the Distrito Federal [Ley Acústica del Distrito Federal], the purpose of which is “to regulate the auditory chaos in public transport and in the streets of the city.”\(^{317}\) This initiative seeks to expressly prohibit any commercial activity on board the subway system, and to allow subway users to denounce cases of infringement. The newspaper article reminded readers that the 5\(^{th}\) Environmental Regulation for Mexico City allows a maximum of sixty-five decibels for sound outdoors. The editors of the article point out however, that the streets of Mexico City surpass eighty decibels, thus “causing severe damage to the Capitalino’s aural health.”\(^{318}\) In other words, despite this supposed concern for the population’s aural wellness, the proposed law does not consider other sources of loud sound in the city that, according to the approved decibel level, could be considered aggressive, such as car engines, honking, loud music in commercial establishments or the amplified chants of street sellers.

This recent initiative parallels in many ways the policies for sonic control in early twentieth century Mexico City. In 1911, for example, only a year after the Revolution war had started, authorities from the local government activated stricter measures to protect Mexico City from the sounds of certain activities that they thought represented sonic harm, such as street vendors, street


\(^{318}\) Idem.
musicians and phonographs in private business. Besides technological changes, the City’s increased loudness was partially due to the growing population of the city, as well as to the changing economy. When the armed phase of the Revolution concluded in 1920, the ensuing economic crisis encouraged an important wave of migration from rural regions of Mexico to the urban center. In this context, people from the countryside tried to integrate themselves into life in the Capital in the most disadvantageous economic conditions. Subsequently, myriad economic activities, vaguely identified as “free professions” (profesiones libres), emerged around the streets of downtown, hardly any of which could be considered “silent.”

Ambulant artisans, food sellers and many more chanted out loud the virtues and prices of their products. Musicians in corners, public squares and bars, as well as the music of phonographs in bars, cafes and taverns, can be listed as the most common sounds ensuing from the many transient economic activities during those years. These sounds were considered “undesirable” by authorities. In the interest of “ordering” the city, the Ayuntamiento kept unprecedented control over the music played in the central streets of downtown. The Department of Public Licenses, was the office in charge of granting licenses for activities on the streets. Their officers tried to require all street musicians to obtain permits to play their marimbas, barrel organs, accordions and other ambulatory instruments.319 This further affected the areas and the ways in which carpa performers advertised their shows in the streets. If previously they were authorized to parade around the central square playing instruments such as trumpets, clarinets, tambours, after these new measures, authorizations for music playing were only given for “non-­‐centric streets” and to activities “not blocking the traffic.”320 Figure 3.5, titled “Jugglers clowns and musicians acting in a street” suggests

319 Requests from street musicians can be verified in AHDF - Licencias en la Vía Pública, (Hereafter AHDF-LVP), Vol. 3229 File. 217, year 1918; Vol. 1713, File. 215-16.

the kind of activities these companies performed in the streets. The info available at the archive does not specify is the street where this photo was taken was close to the central square. However, dated 1935 the photo also suggests that these sort of street performances prevailed in the city in the third decade of the century.

Figure 3.5. “Juggles, clowns and musicians acting in a street” (1935) SINAFO, 98827

New Recording Technologies and Noise in the City

Besides the sonic inconveniences that street musicians represented to authorities and (perhaps) neighbors of downtown, the increasing availability of new technologies among common people contributed to transforming the soundscape of the city, as much as to changing people’s relationship to sound. Sound recordings introduced several new features to the aural realm. Among them can be mentioned disembodied voices, amplification, and the possibility of re-contextualizing
what had once been a live performance. These changes were quickly noticed by neighbors who, living adjacently to jacalones that worked as movie theaters,” coffee houses or bars, complained to authorities about how the playing of recorded, amplified music affected their sleeping time. A typical complaint from 1911 or 1912 refers to the sound source as “una cuestión” (a thing); it turned out to be a phonograph used in a “Salón popular” located in the 7th street of Capuchinas.”

Many requests and complaints now kept in the archive of the Ayuntamiento register the ways in which new technologies modified the neighborhood’s soundscape and people’s lives. Phonographs became ever more widely used during the first decade of the twentieth century. During these years numerous owners of small and traditional commercial establishments requested licenses to play the device, arguing that music attracted more costumers. Commonly, they used the machines to accompany their early daily routines. Even before dawn, the voices of Spanish tiples like María Conesa, or ensembles such as the Banda de Artillería, could be heard from the butcher’s, the bakery, the milk store, the pulquería, and in downtown restaurants, to the discontent of neighbors who were not so pleased by such early demonstrations of musical zeal. As a conciliatory measure, some council officers suggested a playing time ranging between 7 am and 10 pm. But besides this recommendation, there is little information in the archive that allows determining if these measures were ever enforced.

321 AHDF-LVP. Volumes 1711-1714, and 1720 contain several requests by common people to play phonographs in commercial establishments. While during years 1910-1911 requests happened occasionally, in only a matter of two years such petitions increased considerably: AHDF-LVP Vol. 1920, Files 676, 679, 683, 686, (Years 1913-1914). Numerous requests for permissions to play music in phonographs in central streets can be consulted in AHDF: Gobierno del Distrito- Licencias diversas, (Hereafter AHDF-LD), Vols. 1711-1724, (years 1911-1915).

322 One of them contains the petition of an annoyed neighbor who pleads to the authorities that the playing time not start before 7 AM, as the music from the adjacent butcher’s house wakes him up every morning. AHDF-LD, Vol. 1712, File 104, year 1910.

Although the phonograph was initially received as a bothersome intruder, Capitalino people gradually incorporated it into their everyday lives. It is nonetheless understandable that this process occasioned reservations from some people. As Patrick Feaster has explained, the advent of sound records marks a transitional period in the history of sound technology, while it also showcases the ‘crisis’ that results from understanding the place that new technological instruments are to occupy in social life. Mark Katz has explained that in the case of United States society, such “loss” of equilibrium between preexistent sound technologies and the new one was characterized by great “anxiety and introspection” on the part of the listener. This was indeed the case of the City’s chronicler and poet Salvador Novo, who wrote a recollection of sonic memories capturing this transitional moment. By remembering ambulatory musicians in train stations in Mexico City, he lamented how the victrolas were replacing live music in private households.

If you travel, in every train station your jaded polvorientos ears will receive the gift of the guitar song of the mendicant, the blind or the dumb, and the people within, and the municipal pick-up band, will ask you sobbingly: Where are you dear heart? …This cardiac search has been undertaken with unprecedented zeal all through the city by marimbas and player pianos in restaurants and bars […] There is no other country in the world where the Victrolas have achieved the success they enjoy in Mexico […] everyone has a phonograph at home, and they are to be found at the shoe store, the ice-cream store, and various other stores. […] But the people who every now and then used to go to the concerts of the symphony orchestra; who once sent their daughters to the Conservatory to learn how to play piano; who had an upright or a grand piano, or who had nothing, but who enjoyed music when they stumbled upon it, have now acquired victrolas. They are so easily bought by paying in installments that, considered carefully, they are a ‘good investment.’ Then, their presence confers upon the parlor a certain air of elegance and in them any kind of music can be played. ‘Sad Music,’ classical music, records by Caruso and Tetrazzini, tangos by Quiroga -- and all in dim light! --, ‘Porque me has besado tu,’ [Because you kissed me’] and ‘Nunca’ [Never] by Guty Cárdenas…which are all good for entertaining guests, and one has no reason to go out. But it is precisely its double capability to be domestic and polymorphous that has turned the victrolas into an enemy of music and of our people, who are not musical at all. Our brief songs are hideous, even in their brevity. We all know how they become fashionable. In theaters, while the curtain goes down and one stage-set is changed for another, even worse one, the musicians in the orchestra mangle the selected piece.

---


People are indignant, but since they [the musicians] keep on going, the tenth time people hear it, they search for the record and take it home. This has become the fashionable thing to do.  

Novo’s account registers the impact of this technology in the Mexican society during the 1920s. The poet also seems to allude to the early phonograph market. Not coincidentally, he comments on how lines of credit had facilitated acquisition of these devices for an at-home, individualized listening experience. In his account, Novo seems to reproduce the views from commercial slogans claiming that by purchasing a sound record, music too could be “bought” and “taken home,” thus replacing attendance to the theaters. This schizophonic modality of listening, one that disconnected sound both from sound sources and from performing bodies, clearly disquieted Novo. Understandably, he saw the victrola as “the enemy of music.” Not surprisingly either, he used people’s new relationship with recorded sound as an example of a supposed Mexican unmusicality.

Despite Novo’s perception, I believe that the individualized listening model propounded by the recording industry was not fully embraced by Capitalinos, or at least not immediately. Perhaps as an outcome of Díaz’s government’s efforts to encourage public life and outdoor sociability,

---

326 “Si viajáis, en cada estación regalará vuestros empolvados oídos la mendicante canción guitarrada del ciego o del mudo, y el pueblo adentro, la murga municipal os demandará sollozante: ¿Dónde estás corazón? … Búsqueda cardiaca que ha emprendido con eco inaudito en toda la ciudad las marimbas, y las pianolas de los restaurante y las cantinas[…] No hay país del mundo en que las victrolas hayan alcanzado el éxito que en México […] Todo el mundo tiene en su casa un fonógrafo, y los hay ya en las puertas de las zapaterías, de las palenterías, de otras diversas tiendas. […] Pero las personas que acaso solían ir una vez al concierto de la Sinfónica; que antes mandaban a sus niñas al Conservatorio para que aprendieran el piano; que tenían un piano vertical o de cola, o que no tenían nada, pero que “gustaban” de la música cuando tropezaron con ella, adquirieron victrolas. Se compran en abonos tan fáciles que, bien mirado, es una “buena inversión.” Luego, su presencia concede cierto aspecto elegante a las salas y se puede tocar en ellas toda clase de música. “Música triste” música clásica, los discos de Caruso y la Tetrazzini, tangos de la Quiroga – ¡Y todo a media luz! –, “Por que me has besado tu” y “Nunca” de Guty Cádenas… con lo cual se entretienen las visitas y uno no tiene a qué salir. Pero es justamente su doble capacidad de ser domésticas y de ser poliformes lo que ha hecho de las victrolas un enemigo de la música y de nuestro pueblo nada musical. Nuestras breves canciones son horribles, aunque breves. Y todos sabemos como se ponen de moda. En los teatros, mientras el telón baja, se cambia una decoración por otra peor, los señores de la orquesta machacan la pieza elegida. La gente se indigna, pero como ellos siguen, a la décima vez de escucharle, buscan la pieza en disco y se la llevan a su casa. Se ha puesto de moda.” Salvador Novo, “Música Mexicana,” Revista de Revistas. (February 26, 1928). As habitual among the circles of intellectuals Novo uses the pronoun “vosotros” and its corresponding conjugations, a gesture which endows his discourse with authority.

Capitalinos continued to enjoy a socialized musical experience more than a semi-private or individualized one, suggested by the fact that phonographs became part of the public soundscape in the streets. A photograph taken in 1934, a time when access to phonographs was no longer a privilege of the elites, shows a man soliciting coins in the street, in exchange for playing some recently recorded music on his phonograph. This outdoor modality of audition could well be interpreted as a continuation of the tradition of listening pre-recorded music in barrel organs. This tradition so popular in the nineteenth century prevails in Mexico City even today (Fig 3.5).

The photo delicately suggests how certain sonic practices persist, in spite of official or commercial interest to transform them abruptly. Ironically, such persistence often causes new, unpredicted uses for sound technology to arise. Surely, the opposite is also true: despite technology’s purported neutrality, it affects musicians and performance practices in the most unexpected ways.

Figure 3.6. “Man playing a phonograph in the streets of the city”, (1934), SINAFO, Archivo Casasola, Inv. 127344.
Modernity, Sound Recordings at the Carpas and the Creation of Rural Space

From the first years of the twentieth century, companies such as Columbia Phonograph, Victor Talking Machine Co., Edison Records and Odeon (International Talking Machines) started recording a broad variety of Mexican musicians to cover the market of music in Spanish both in the US and Mexico. And while the recrudescence of the Revolution war in 1914 forced representatives of these companies temporarily back into the US, the pause only allowed time for more technological advances, like the microphone, to be invented and improved.

The commercial slogans by these companies simultaneously purported an individualized musical experience and contributed to creating the imaginaries of modernity. An advertisement published in 1910 by the Edison Co., for instance, publicizes the tinfoil phonograph and the wax cylinders that were available in local stores. This ad extols the device’s “modern style” and highlights its ability to “bring the music home to people who could not attend theaters.” As the advertisement’s upper banner states: “The best artists in the world sing and play exclusively for Edison Phonograph, endorsing through this act what they consider the best medium for reproducing their artistic works, in the benefit of all those people who cannot attend the theaters in order to hear them in person.

328 An extended list of the many recordings that companies from the United States made in Mexican territory in the time period comprised in this study can be consulted in Richard K. Spottswood ed. Ethnic Music on Records : A Discography of Ethnic Recordings Produced in the United States, 1893 to 1942 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990).


Figure 3.7 Advertisement, 1910, “El fonógrafo Edison.” published in Revista de Revistas, (March 27th, 1910).

A detailed image of this ad shows a man at his own house smiling in delight at the sound coming out from the tinfoil phonograph while an elderly woman to his side seems to wait her turn to hear the sonic marvel with great expectation. Contrasting the past with the modern present, this image, in the context of the advertisement, suggests that phonographs were seen not only as instruments for entertainment but also as signs of modernity, concomitantly linking the device with notions of progress, urban hearing cultures and modern life-styles.

“Los mejores artistas del mundo entero cantan y tocan exclusivamente para el fonógrafo Edison, dando a conocer por ese hecho que los consideran el mejor medio para reproducir sus trabajos artísticos en beneficio de todas aquellas personas que no pueden acudir a los teatros para oírlos personalmente. Fonógrafo Edison […] Todo fonógrafo Edison, estilo moderno está arreglado para tocar fonogramas Amberol de cuatro minutos, así como los antiguos de sólo dos minutos.” Revista de Revistas, (March 27, 1910).

Thompson, 229-294. Other scholars such Tim Taylor, Mark Katz, and Tony Grajeda, have also supported the idea of phonographs as a technological mark of modernity. See Timothy Taylor, Mark, Dean Katz, Tony Grajeda. Music, sound, and technology in America : a documentary history of early phonograph, cinema, and radio. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
Figure 3.7b. Detail from the lower right corner of the Advertisement, “El fonógrafo Edison” published in Revista de Revistas, (March 27th, 1910).

Just as years earlier the telephone was supposed to annihilate the geographic distance between people, so the phonograph was extolled as the instrument capable of bringing the city and the countryside together. But ironically, even if technology sonically and musically connected people across distance, the discursive fields that advertisers and music impresarios created around these two loci actually distanced them. A second advertisement by retailers of these devices is a case in point. Implicitly defining the divide, the publicists persuade their customers: “Out of the Capital City, we can bring the attractions of the great city to you anywhere in the Republic. The popular couplets in vogue in all theaters; the famous pieces of the Police Band, or any other piece, instrumental or vocal, the attractions of foreign music or popular Mexican music, [are all available] through the phonograph.”

---

333 “Los mejores artistas del mundo entero cantan y tocan exclusivamente para el fonógrafo Edison, dando a conocer por ese hecho que los consideran el mejor medio para reproducir sus trabajos artísticos en beneficio de todas aquéllas personas que no pueden acudir a los teatros para oírlos personalmente. Fonógrafo Edison […] Todo fonógrafo Edison, estilo moderno está arreglado para tocar fonogramas Amberol de cuatro minutos, así como los antiguos de sólo dos minutos.” Revista de Revistas, (March 27, 1910).

334 “Fuera de la capital, en cualquier parte de la República podemos poner al alcance de usted todas las atracciones de la gran ciudad. Las coplas populares que están en boga en los teatros; las famosas piezas de la Banda de Policía, o cualquiera otra pieza, instrumental o vocal, o las atracciones de la música extranjera o de la popular Mexicana por medio del fonógrafo.” Revista de Revistas, (May 8, 1910).
While the above ad does not specify the reasons why people could not go to the theaters to hear live music, one can infer that the big musical attractions and the theaters were amenities associated only with urban centers. Therefore, the early presence of foreign recording companies can be interpreted as a relevant factor leading to the definitive polarization of ideas of ‘the urban’ and ‘the rural’ that were most characteristic during the Post-Revolution (1923-1950). As Thomas Turino observed: “musical nationalist cosmopolitanism is a project fraught with the contradictions of mediating
between the local and the metropolis.”335 So if initially these records and ads united the different cultural regions of Mexico around the central capital in an unitary “imagined community”, the force of the images created by these companies provoked the association of certain music and sounds with the metropolis, which henceforth began to be heard as “modern.” Meanwhile certain other musics and sounds began to be associated with the countryside, in its turn depicted as “secluded,” and hence also as “traditional.”336 In the midst of the modernizing craze, it is likely that the advertising campaigns of recording companies were very resonant among the Mexican population, thus contributing to widen the gap between extant imaginaries of the two milieux.

The influence of these companies constitute yet another example of the “epistemologies of purification” proposed by Ochoa Gautier. Expanding on her argument about practices of recontextualization (facilitated by sound recording, for example), she maintains that the political moment in which “purifications of aurality” occurred was during the first decade of the twentieth century, in the context of Nationalistic movements. She emphasizes that the role played by the recording industry was crucial in “highlighting the contradictions of a postcolonial modernity.”337

At the turn of the century in Mexico, a variety of social actors, immersed in the modernizing project, contributed – consciously or not – to forging the sounds by which the new urban identity was constructed. As illustrated by Casanovas’ article about the rumba, these social actors included figures of authority, local government representatives, the executives of the recording industry and their distributors and music critics, for certain; but also the many musicians, comedians, theater managers and singers who agreed to record for these companies.


Many of these last were members of the carpas community. By analyzing two sound records from the carpas tradition, I wish to exemplify how the early recording industry in Mexico contributed to the creation of an opposition between the two models of aurality I have discussed throughout this chapter. By so doing this, I respond to Ochoa’s call to “deconstruct the history of sonic inequalities imbued in the history of folklorists and popular music genres in Latin America,” by outlining how these two models of aurality were rendered unequal.  

Since recording companies advertised their “talking machines” as an alternative for those who could not attend the theaters to hear fashionable music live, their records included musicians of formal theaters along with itinerant musicians, some of whom were known to have participated in the carpas shows. If the presence of the so-called Afro-Antillean music in the city had already awakened the rhetorical anxieties of the “letrados,” no less important was the anxiety of inspectors and councilors, which played an important role in defining the repertory that would count as “popular music.” It is possible that due to its associations with the “popular classes”, the music that had been authorized by the Ayuntamiento and inspectors for carpas performances was the same as that made accessible for recording companies. It is possible too that in the long run and by force of merchandising, these recorded tracks and performers gradually became the early canon of Mexican popular music. This hypothesis however, awaits further research.

The Edison phonograph advertisement shown in Fig 3.9 mentions some musicians who were known to have performed in Carpas and circus.

---

338 Ibidem, 819.
Figure 3.9 Advertisement with the legend “All or any of these artists will play or sing for you in the Edison Phonograph.”

Miss Emilia Vergeri, Pabla García Bonfil, Rafael Bezares, Ábrego and Picazo, Manuel Romero Malpica, Quinteto Jordá-Rocabruna, Ismael Magaña, Matilde Herrera, Cocolense Quartet, Trio Arriaga, The Police band, The Artillery Band. All or any of these artists will sing or play for you in the Edison Phonograph, as long as you want it.

The guitar duet “Ábrego and Picazo” is mentioned in this ad. Along with them, other duets such as those made up of “Rosales y Robinson” and “Contreras y Carrillo,” are thought to have participated in venues such as itinerant circus, puppetry companies, the Orrin circus, as well as in the carpas variety shows. Jocose songs, sainetes, brief corridos or sones, parodies and comedy sketches

339 “Todos o cualquiera de estos artistas tocarán o cantarán para usted en el Fonógrafo Edison.”


341 Members of the Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos sustain that “with all certainty we can affirm that the artistic origin [of these duets] dates back to the itinerant “actors of the legua”, from the years of the “sanctified” provincial theater, the circus, and the old tent covered carpas which went from one place to the other to make the delights of people of scarce resources; although we do not have doubts that they also participated in the stage of the elegant Orrin circus.” Podemos afirmar con toda seguridad que el origen artístico [de estos duetos] se remonta desde la transhumancia de los “actores de la legua”, hasta los años del “santificado” teatro provinciano, los circos y los atañones enlonados de las carpas que iban de un lugar a otro, para hacer las delicias de la gente de pocos recursos; aunque no
characterized their musical repertory. While sound records may have increased the fame of these musicians, most likely their acts were already widely known by local audiences who frequently attended these venues of entertainment. The historical significance of these duets rests in how their musical urban chronicles depicted everyday life in the city and its surroundings. Because presumably their performances were very familiar to dwellers of Mexico City, the records made by these musicians have shaped some historian’s perceptions that their singing styles “captured the popular and colloquial Mexican language.”

*Casamiento de Indios*

As numerous scholars have debated, the advent of sound recording technologies was highly consequential for live performance practices, as well as for the development of new auditory techniques. The sound record of a comic sketch called *Casamiento de Indios* (Indian Wedding) illustrates these effects clearly.

Recorded very early after the emergence of commercial sound records, *Casamientos de Indios*, presents an interesting case for debating issues of sound fidelity, reproductibility and changing ideas of sonic realism. It also illustrates how music helped creating a divide between the urban and the rural realms. *Casamiento de Indios* is a comic sketch performed by the duet of Maximiliano Rosales and

---

342 Music historians such as Pablo Dueñas y Jesús Flores Escalante have shared such views. Ábrego y Picazo, Rosales y Robinson. *Música Del 900*. Ábrego y Picazo, Rosales y Robinson. *Archivo Histórico: Crónica de la Gran Ciudad de México*. (Serie Testimonial) Disco Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos México. (AMEF T-44-04);

Rafael Robinson and recorded twice; by Columbia in 1906 and by Victor in 1908. Presumably, before the arrival of recording companies in Mexico many of these dialogues “were taken from small comedy sketches of the Rosete Aranda puppets company.” Performed either as a puppetry act or by the two comedians on stage, this number is connected to the literary subgenre “cuadro costumbrista,” also known in English literary scholarship as “essay or sketch of manners.” Derived from literary costumbrism, the purpose of these “sketches” is to describe popular types, behaviors or habits considered representative of a given profession, cultural region, or social class by means of nostalgic or satirical representations. The narratives of these numbers may include for example, local celebrations, traditional costumes or interactions between representative characters of any given society.

This act recreates a wedding in the nearby town of Iztapalapa. The main characters are a church priest and the bride’s mother, who negotiate to make the wedding celebration possible. In both versions, the text is organized in octosyllabic verses and in hemistiches of 8+8 (occasionally of 8+7). The mother’s character is linguistically depicted as an indigenous woman, as indicated by several phonetic and intonation marks in her speech. Following comedic conventions that date back to the sixteenth century theatrical practices, linguistic distortions of the Spanish language served to comically – and most often dismissively – represent the Indian. Contrasting with the

---


345 This argument is sustained by researchers of the Asociación Mexicana de estudios Fonográficos See, Música del 900.

346 Similar linguistic marks of “Indianness” in musical pieces can be observed as early as the sixteenth century in colonial villancicos. I treat this in detail in chapter four of this dissertation.

347 Some of these marks are: use of the object pronoun ‘tú’ when the formal ‘usted’ would be expected ("Ay padre, te lo soplico, que no lo seas tan carero"); laísmos or unnecessary use of the neutral pronoun “lo” ("se lo quiere casar", “que lo seas mi
priest’s unmarked Spanish, the Indian is portrayed as incapable to correctly integrate with the
“speech community” that at the time counted as the legitimate one.348

Señora: Muy buenos días padrecito,
como lo está su merced
¿Cómo lo pasó la noche
de salud, como está usted?
Padre: Muy bien hija, muchas gracias.
Señora: Yo te lo vengo avisar
que mi hija María Chetita
ya se lo quiere casar
Padre: ¿Y con quien va a ser la boda?
Señora: Con el hijo de tío Cleto,
con el muchacho Colás,
Quieren que lo haya repiques,
que lo cante el monaguillo,
y también el tamborío.
Padre: Todo se hará, si señora
pero un festejo tan grande
le cuesta mucho dinero
Señora: Ay padre, te lo suplico
que no lo seas tan carero.
Yo te lo daré un gallina
con diez pollos y un faisán,
Un pato y un guajolote
más grande que el sacristán
Padre: Animales no permito
se pongan en el altar
Cincuenta pesos la boda
es lo que te ha de costar.
Señora: Válgame el sínior de Chalma
y la corte celistial,
Toma pronto el dínecito
ya lo puedes empezar.
Padre: Muy bien, que pasen los novios
(¡Vivan los novios!)
y que el sacristán comience
luego, luego a repicar
(Suena música)
P: And to whom?
Señora: With the son of Mr. Cleto,
The young Colás.
They want the toll of the bells
And the singing of the altar boy
The playing of the shawm
And also of the drums.
P: Yes, yes, everything will be done,
But such a big celebration
is going to cost you a lot.
Señora: Please, Priest, I beg you
Let it be not so pricey
I will give you a hen
With ten chickens and a pheasant
A duck and a turkey
Bigger than the sacristan
P: I do not allow animals
to be placed in the altar
Fifty pesos the wedding,
That is what you ought of pay
Señora: For my Lord of Chalma’s sake
And the heavenly court!
Here the money,
you can begin.
Padre: Good! May the bride and the groom come!
(Long life to the bride and the groom!)
May the sacristán,
begin the tolling.
(Music)

Casamiento de Indios however, is not only a way of putting down Indians; there is also an element of
jabbing at authority. Here the person of the priest, for example, is depicted as greedy, led by

mujer”), phonetic replacement of vowels (“soplico” for “suplico”, “polquito por pulquito”); use of the diminutive form (“polquito” for pulque); and inversion of gender in nouns (“el chirimía” for “la chirimía”).

348 For an interpretation of “speech community” that considers vocality, phonetics and the surrounding soundscape from a phenomenological perspective see Bruce Smith, The Acoustic World of Early Modern England : Attending to the O-Factor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
personal interest and possibly too, as glutton (see my full transcription in Appendix 10). Therefore, this act is simultaneously a depiction and a subversion of social roles. I address this issue in chapter four.

Little is known about why or how representatives from the Columbia and Victor companies contacted Rosales and Robinson in the early years of the twentieth century. But, since the duet performed in the famous Circus Orrín – a venue mostly frequented by the city’s elites – it is possible that this venue gave them greater visibility over other itinerant performers.

Jonathan Sterne has explained that, when recorded, these sketches were the foundation of a new recording genre called “descriptive specialty” – or “escena descriptiva” as it is known is Spanish – and whose purpose was “to reenact events for the [recording] machine.” Sterne explains that the existence of these records implicates debating issues of mediation, realism and fidelity, for they were intended to showcase the potential of sound reproduction. “Somewhere between a contrived recreation of an actual event and a vaudeville sketch, descriptive specialties offered their listeners ‘tone pictures’ of different places and events, [they] were representations of distant events available for domestic consumption.”

Likewise, Peter Claire Haney asserted that, “the idea of the descriptive specialty was to “simulate the aural experience of some scene and to give the listener a sense of being part of that scene. [These records] were meant to be soundscapes or ‘slices’ of aurally simulated life.”

This comedy act is a representation of and not the actual Indian wedding and, when recorded, the issues of mediation and representation challenge the analyst with added layers of mediation. Debating the implications of descriptive specialties for the philosophy of sound

---


350 Peter Claire Haney, 250.
production and reproduction, Sterne defends that in creating a new listening experience, these records produced too a new aesthetic of sonic realism, and one in which the medium had to pass unnoticed, “even if audiences were aware of the fabrication of the actual performance on record.” Borrowing the language of Barthes, Sterne continues, “the criterion is realism, not reality itself. […] The point of the artifice is to connote denotation, to construct a realism that holds the place of reality without being it.”

The Columbia Records version of this act was recorded in 1908. Both in the performance and in the record the intention is indeed realistic, and realism is understood as “faithfulness” in recreating a given event or sonic object. While in the cuadro costumbrista – the first layer of reproductibility – the goal is to realistically recreate the soundscape of the wedding; in the descriptive specialty – the second layer – the aim is to faithfully reproduce the fictitious sonic world fabricated in the performance.

At the start of the recording, the presenter (most likely one of the duet’s members) locates the scene in the town of Iztapalapa, situated in the southeast of the Valley of Mexico. Because at the turn of the twentieth century the town of Iztapalapa was not only out of the city but also mostly populated by Indians, the mention was probably intended to add a greater sense of cultural authenticity to the sonic culture of Iztapalapa as understood by the performers. The use of several musical markers also added a sense of provincialism to the scene. For example, after the priest and the bride’s mother have come to an agreement, the wedding ceremony starts. The music that is contextually used at the moment when bride and broom walk down the aisle is the Mayan song known as “Konex konex,” thus serving as the sonic mark of ‘indianness.’ Similarly, a jarabe, a musical form originated during colonial times in central Mexico, is played at the end to close the celebratory procession. As an opening mark of the rite of marriage proper, two chords introduce the

homily which is recited in a made-up hispanicized parodic Latin: “Domino godiscus di titiritorum casamiento de indiorum tamalorum apestorum, per omnia seculor seculorum.” These lines “jokingly” mark Indians as “stinky” (apestorum) and refer to their habit of eating tamales (tamalorum). Furthermore, “titiritorum,” which can be translated to English as “puppetrytorum”, suggests that this act was given with puppets, one of the variety acts most typical of the earliest jaca
donés. This record thus shows some traces of the sketch.

Before the couple walks into the temple, the dialogue between the characters is interrupted by diegetic music from what is supposed to be the town’s brass band. Chirimias (a type of folk shawm), church bells, celebratory exclamations, a chattering crowd, yells and laughter are all presented as part of the celebration in a more or less erratic format. The result is a sonic cluster, a din similar to one that would be produced outdoors in an actual religious celebration. While this provides an agile rhythm, it also makes the dialogue hard to understand. Sterne defends that to achieve realism these records considered the fabrication of noises. However, he also clarifies that fidelity to the sound entailed that the narratives of these records had to be “short and to the point, effects rudimentary and dialogue brief.” Probably then, the sonic syntax of this record represented a problem for the kind of sound fidelity desired to showcase the technology. In other words, if “fidelity” was understood as faithfulness to what sounds, instead as faithfulness to the celebration represented in the sketch, then the sonic organization of the record had to be modified.

Contrastingly, in the second version recorded by Victor Records in 1908, the dialogue between the characters is presented in a much more organized fashion, making the dialogue more

---

352 The Second Vatican Council, where the decision was made that masses here held in vernacular languages rather than Latin, was not held until 1962-1965.

353 Sterne, *The Audible Past*, 244.
intelligible for a listener who is not presently watching the act.\textsuperscript{354} It is slower, and the theatrical inflexions of the voice are exaggerated, perhaps to supplement the performance of spontaneity found in the first version. The diegetic music that signals the Indians approaching the temple is a waltz, but in this version the environmental sounds and the dialogues are organized in a call-and-response pattern. As opposed to Columbia’s version, the allusion to the puppets (titiritorum) is omitted in the homily. This allows us to infer that Rosales and Robinson acted this sketch for the gramophone, and not for an audience, most likely focusing their attention on the most effective way to capture their voices. The homily section changes slightly: “\textit{Casamientorum indiorum apestorum, Musicorum, atragantorum molorum, tamalorum, per Omnia seculo seculorum}.” In this version, characterization of Indians as “stinky” remains, but the homily also includes a reference to musicians who will “stuff themselves” (atragantorum = atragantarse) with tamales and mole (molorum). The musical marker of “indianness” in this version resembles the \textit{sonecito de la tierra “El Perico,”} which is played emulating the sound of reed flutes with accompanying drums.\textsuperscript{355}

As it seems, Columbia’s goal was to “realistically” document the cuadro costumbrista that Rosales and Robinson performed recreating the sonic environment of the Indian celebration allegedly in the most faithful way possible. Therefore, the “disordered” (for lack of a better term) syntax of this first version is more akin to what would have occurred in a live performance. The second version recorded two years later by Victor, presents the same scene in a much more “legible” and “organized” sonic structure. In contrast with Columbia’s version, Victor’s recording sounds suspiciously well organized, suggesting that faithfulness to the performance of the comedy act, was less relevant. The record by Victor focuses primarily on the clarity of the dialogue and the sounds,

\textsuperscript{354} Victor Records: Victor 63236-A , Date of recording taken from the Encyclopedic Discography of Victor Records (UCSB), (http://victor.library.ucsb.edu/)

\textsuperscript{355} I have compared it with the son listed as “El Perico” transcribed and published in Miguel Rios Toledano, \textit{Aires Nacionales Mexicanos : Potpourri, Op. 558}. (Mexico, D.F.: A. Wagner & Levien Sucs).
therefore it depended on a greater degree of sonic and verbal intelligibility rather than on the realism with which Rosales and Robinson’ performance managed to represent the sonic world of the Indians of Iztapalapa.

These records illustrate too the co-dependency of the practices of sound production and its reproduction at the advent of sound recording: From the moment Rosales and Robinson envisioned registering this sketch, effects on the production of sound started to take place: “If its reproduction exists even as a possibility, sound production is oriented toward reproduction from the very moment sound is created as a ‘source.’ Sound reproduction always involves a distinct practice of sound production. [...] both copy and original are products of the process of reproductibility.”

The contrasts between these two recordings, suggests inadvertent documentation of the gradual process through which sound records introduced new perceptual models. Sterne explains that according to the newly introduced ‘audile techniques,’ “the reproduced sounds apprehended were now supposed to be transparent, that is, without a code, and therefore immediately apparent to any listener who knew the technique.” One can supposed that the “clearer” the sonic discourse, the more transparent the code would appear. Seemingly, for Victor records, clarity meant to have a record without “noise”, even if “noise” was purportedly fabricated to mimic the sonic environment supposedly found in an Indian wedding. Judging from their contrasting sonic structures, these two versions prompted two contrasting listening techniques: one that could appreciate the realistic mimesis of the “original” event, (even if this existed only in the imagination of Rosales and Robinson) and another one able to appreciate the clarity of the sound events, and decode it as faithfulness to what it sounded. For this second technique, reduced sonic complexity, limitation of fabricated noises and, in other words, “sonic order” were important.

---


357 Idem.
Crucial in determining these differences is the competition between two companies for a new market of listeners: record collectors. As the companies assumed, these profile of consumer will be stricter about the quality of recorded sound. Concerning the raised awareness of sound perception introduced by sound records, Emily Thompson pointed out that:

[The collector], derived pleasure from knowing that he had obtained the clearest and best-sounding reproduction possible. His consummate taste enabled him to avoid the noises that characterized the inferior records that he had rejected. Competition among phonograph manufacturers was intense, and advertising campaigns encouraged all consumers to engage in such critical listening to determine which brand of phonograph offered the best sound.  

In its advertising campaigns, Columbia Records extolled the “clarity” and “naturalness” of its sound. But, although the Columbia record was “authentic” or “realistic”, such realism may have represented a commercial drawback when compared with the idealized sound fidelity celebrated by its competitor Victor. By contrast, Victor records was invested in promoting the technical qualities that made of the Victrola phonograph such a commercial success. A clear sound quality was Victor’s greatest commercial asset. From this it follows that, although “authentic” or “realistic,” the disorganized sonic structure in Rosales and Robinson’s former performance was less amenable to the company’s commercial interests. Clearly then, the problem of “fidelity” was embedded within a greater context of commercial competitiveness in a moment when foreign companies were an essential factor in the gradual transformation of Mexico into a consumer society. Record companies’ authoritative position within the ideology of modernity imposed disciplines of sounding and hearing.


359 Columbia Records were marketed by their “loudness” [fuerza], “clarity” and “naturalness”, attributes that were also associated with “moving forward.” Yet another advertisement published in *Revista de Revistas*, claimed: “Los fonógrafos y discos dobles de la famosa marca Columbia ocupan ahora el primer lugar en el mundo entero, por su FUERZA, CLARIDAD Y NATURALIDAD, por su baratura, resistencia y elegancia. Siempre adelante! Cuando piense usted comprar un fonógrafo, no elija otra marca porque habrá dado un paso atrás.” Capsules in the original. *Revista de Revistas*, (February 27, 1910).
that tacitly valued “sonic order,” “sound fidelity” and “clarity.” Thought of as sonic values, these were more resonant with late Porfirian notions of order and progress.

Located at the bottom of this chain of representations are the actual Indians of Iztapalapa. Unable to represent themselves, their sonic practices were used either to cause laughter or to advance the commercial project of the recoding industry. In either case references to what Rosales and Robinson understood as Indian music and as the “indian sonic world” endowed the new text greater authenticity. This record therefore renders audible the lack of agency of this marginal group as well as the social tensions between social groups with unequal access to means of representation. The Indians characterized in both of these comic sketches thus remain voiceless and axiomatically “subaltern.”  

Because these records were made in a particular moment of cultural and economic change in Mexico, the sound record of the sketch Casamiento de Indios reveals the role of mediating technologies in the creation of locality and in the politics of aesthetics in music. Rosales and Robinson’s choice of music illustrates how certain musical practices were provincialized and how “traditional sounds” were created or, to use Ochoa’s terms, “purified.”

Indeed, by representing the sounds of the non-urban by means of stereotypical representations of a distinctively “Indian” soundscape, the commercial records by Columbia and Victor effectively contributed to distancing Mexico City from other regions. As a result, regional towns appeared as rural and provincial, while their music was portrayed as “pure” and “authentic.”

---

360 See Spivak “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and Introduction. I also discuss the social implications of such modalities of comedic representation of Mexican Indians in chapter four.
The Sound of Disobedience

*El Gendarme y el Pelado*\(^{361}\)

Recordings of other comedy sketches from the carpas shows suggest the existence of different models of social interactions between authorities and carpa musicians. During the Porfirian regime, Victor records had already recorded the comedy sketch called “The Policeman and the Tramp” (*El gendarme y el pelado*) by the female-male duet Consuelo Contreras and Eduardo Carrillo. This sketch portrays some musicians reclaiming their civic right to make noise.” A ‘gendarme’ attempts to arrest a man with the charge of “making noise in the streets” (escandalizar en las calles) and “take him to the office” (presumably the Police office).” (It is worth noticing how this fictional situation resembles the case of Mr. Lobato and Don Hipólito Amor). Eduardo Carrillo plays the pelado, while Consuelo Contreras, the woman of the duet, plays the part of the gendarme. Her cross-gender performance makes for an interesting comedic effect.

The title of this sketch introduces from the start the two characters at play. The gendarme is a neighborhood policeman and hence a local figure of authority.\(^{362}\) The pelado, by contrast, is a social outcast who, according to the common use of the term, is unworthy of any social respect. The social hierarchy between them is soon subverted through pranks and verbal jokes on the pelado’s part (see Appendix 11). Indeed, the comical aspect of this sketch mainly resides in the disregard, or I should say disrespect, with which the pelado treats the gendarme. The officer reprimands the man for “escandalizar”, and legalistically characterizes his misdemeanor as “moral faults” and “faults to the police” [faltas a la moral, a la policía]. The pelado interrupts and, in a rhyming and metrically

---


\(^{362}\) The term ‘gendarme’ is a hispanized version of ‘gens’d’arme’, which probably derives from the period of French occupation. In the local language it simply refers to a policeman.
corresponding sentence, complains by retorting: “a lack of truth”? thus suggesting the charges against
him are unjustified. Subsequently, every accusation presented by the policeman is met with a pun or
verbal joke by the pelado, who through successive lexical strategies, avoids being taken to the police
station. The pelado then gains the gendarme’s confidence by pointing out that they are neighbors, and
tries his next trick: he offers to bribe him for “un tostón,” or fifty cents. When the policeman declines
the offer, the pelado raises his bribe by ten times; the policeman agrees to let him go in exchange for
the five pesos. But to the gendarme’s surprise, the pelado, unwilling to pay the bribe, adds: “No
neighbor, I was just joking.” He then promises to “amenizar con una cantada” (“make things nice by
singing a song) deceiving him yet again with a verbal ruse. The puzzled officer mishears the pelado’s
“amenizar” (make nice) as amenazar (threaten), whereupon the pelado nonchalantly corrects him, and
even dares to tell him “no sea güey” (don’t be stupid!). Closing the sketch and clearly taking the pelado’s
side, Contreras and Carrillo musically intervene with the following song:

Figure 3.10. El Gendarme y el pelado, (1st phrase).

The song denounces the abuses of authority (“ni a ti, ni a mí ni a usted, nos dejan de molestar”) and urges
common people not to be afraid (“ni tú, ni yo, ni usted, nos debemos asustar”). On top of the lyrics’
defiant content, derisive gestures are also musically achieved. The simple melodic structure of the
first phrase is poignant and picaresque due to the stacatto articulation of the violin, and the dotted rhythm followed by two shorter notes in unison; while the interval of a falling fifth in the last syllable of the word “molestar” also evokes the mocking sound of a local, tuned jeer, “lero-lero” (which is arranged in turn in a pattern of a descending 4th followed by a descending 5th). The resulting melody is very memorable, especially since listeners heard it four times: it was presented as an instrumental introduction and then three subsequent times with different lyrics. Arguably, this would have increased the chances that people in the audience went away singing or whistling it. The lampooning of the authorities is given a further edge through the sonic qualities of the instrumentation and the performers’ voices, both of which have very nasal timbres. The nonsensical and teasing “tibiribiribiribi” is scornfully supported by the cornet’s nasal gesture in the second phrase.

Figure. 3.11

The contrasting timbre of the mixed male-female ensemble is suitable too for the moment when these nonsensical vocables are introduced. Considering that the voice of the gendarme is that of Consuelo Contreras, her performance feminizes the character and marks it as a travesty of authority. Furthermore, the characteristic linguistic performance of both characters – intonation and accent -- is meant to indicate that they both pertain to the same locale and to the same social class: not only are they neighbors, but both are members of the capitalino working class. Their social closeness further undermines the authority of the policeman.
The sum of all these elements—the words, the accent with which they are pronounced, timbral contrasts, and the derisive “Tibiribiribis,” paired to the sardonic laughter that accompanies the song, can be understood as socially empowering gestures. In other words, the pelado contests official discourses of urban order and progress, which is to say, modernity. Clearly, the disrespect with which the pelado addresses the gendarme, by offering to bribe him and fooling him afterwards, indicates the pelado’s ability to subvert and escape authority. In this instance, the representation of a pelado is an appropriation of that figure’s social stigma on the part of these musicians, who used it to suggest their sympathies with the oppressed and marginalized. Through performance, such instances of disregard, indifference, confidence, — and in some cases open disobedience — to the authorities, may support the idea of this performatic act as a vehicle of civil resistance, confronting the city’s government not only with its inability to effectively control the soundscape of the city, but also its social representations and ideas.

The fact that this sketch was recorded and commercially distributed means that it had already transcended the realm of live performance. As such, it had embedded in the city’s immediate sonic landscape, thus becoming an artifact of popular criticism, and an instrument for sneering at authority. What is more, it was a commercially viable one. This suggests that the concerns of inspectors and officials for subversive live performances at the beginning of the century were already becoming obsolete with the advent of the music recording companies.

Paradoxically, commercial availability of records like this also marked the gradual assimilation of the pelado to mainstream entertainment, a process by which this figure began to lose his subversive power. I deal with the process of this assimilation in chapter four.
Conclusions

The cases presented in this chapter suggest the soundscape of the Mexico City was configured in the early twentieth century. In this sonic sphere, musicking at the carpas introduced several tensions between two modes of aurality, respectively associated with the modern and the traditional. Changes in the architecture, technology and economics in Mexico at the turn of the century caused a radical transformation in the physicality of sound production. But architectural transformations, electrical energy, and the introduction of new transport and recording technologies were not the only elements introducing changes to the sonic realm. Since the country at large was undergoing intense political, economic and socio-cultural changes, the sonic/aural realm was also irrevocably transformed.

As I have shown in this chapter, the perception of that which counted as music, noise, or escándalo, (whether these sounds were heard as traditional or modern, as morally offensive or innocuous, as civilized or uncultured, as primitive or authentic), was imbued in those who listened. Such interpretations of the sonic sphere responded to subjective ways of understanding the sonic and the cultural world inhabited by the listener. These understandings also determined how people inscribing the historical records that constructed their cultural and sonic Otherness. And the subjective conditions that determined such understandings were in turn shaped by the different political, economic and social agendas ongoing in Mexico before and immediately after the Revolution.

Due to their deviation from the model of contemplative listening, dominant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the sonic and aural practices cultivated at the carpas were categorized as “escandalosas”, “backward,” “vulgar” or “uncultured”, and hence incapable of participating in civilization and progress. Over inspector Sampe’s discourse about listening to Beethoven’s Kreutzer Sonata, over the provoking dancing of the tipples singing couplets, over the
punishment of Lobato for having danced to the rumba and finally, over an idealized “accurate sound” crafted by record companies, the ghost of civilization hovered; it motivated the actions and discourses of figures of authority, leading them to belittle the musical practices at the carpas. But, however strong their enforcement, these actions and discourses were not always and not necessarily adopted by the urban population of postcolonial Mexico. Rather, they were met with people’s long ingrained habits, or with their open retaliations, in a complex cultural system of social interactions.

The cases presented in this chapter illustrate the general struggles of all Mexican society to adjust to rapid sonic and social changes. They also demonstrate the difficulties that many educated Mexican subjects met in trying to transition from a culture that had been territorially and culturally colonized, to one that was being subjectively colonized by the aesthetic (and behavioral) values of the Central European empires of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Paradoxically enough, all this happened as Mexican governors were trying to make of Mexico a sovereign nation with an identity of its own.

The polarity between the figure of the real-life tiple María Conesa and the invented housewife Doña Carmela is my historical-fictitious reference to the opposition between tradition and modernity, as well as to the effect of this opposition not only on men but also in society at large. The contrast between what I suggest to have been Inspector Jiménez’ contrite and conflicted sexual body, and Lobato’s uncontrite, unrestrained dancing incarnates this conflict in another way.

I have illustrated how peoples’ use of the new technologies for sound reproduction generated unprecedented ways to conceive “noise” in the streets. Similarly I have shown how, in their commercial race, record companies inculcated different listening techniques and with them the opposed values of “sound clarity” and “noise.” I have also provided an interpretation on how, in what was perhaps an effort to document and preserve their performances, carpa musicians like Rosales and Robinson fabricated the sounds of provincial Mexico and, most likely inadvertently,
contributed to strange Mexican Indians from the City, and therefore from the modernizing project altogether.

If all of the above suggest that the modernizing project was overpowering, it is worth noticing its inherent contradictions. The género psicalíptico and other undesirable sonic practices were tolerated in the carpas because they helped the city’s modern image. Then in turn, tolerance for the carpas allowed for comedic enactments such as the pelado mocking the authorities, to camouflage these acts perilous potential under a blanket of comedy, and “trivial,” “frivolous” entertainment, serving as contestations to the seemingly inextricable transit to modernity. Similarly, dysfunctions in the governing apparatus can be added to the list of actions interfering with the modernizing process. The ambiguous role of inspectors can be mentioned among such dysfunctions. Because the inspectors were frequent customers of carpas shows, they ended up knowing the repertory better than anyone else. This increases the chances that, as a result of their familiarity with it, they ended up enjoying it too. This may have led them to overlook its subversive potential, or to condone it due to the social proximity they had with members of the carpa companies and members of the audience. Such day-to-day interactions between the “people” and the authorities suggest that negotiations, tensions, contestations or even camaraderie inherently limited the power of inspectors, and therefore the Ayuntamiento office, to enforce official regulations.

The obsession for public control of the sonic, illustrates how the governors and intellectual elites’ desire to become “modern” and “civilized” deeply contrasted with the conventional race-politics they professed. This reveals the continuities with the colonial order. On the other hand, the many failures of the civilizing project shed light on instances of cultural persistence and cultural resistance on the part of common people. The carpa community’s disregard for expectations about their listening culture, their disobedience to the official regulations, or simply their lack of concern
for adopting “civilized” listening behavior, created tension in the sonic public sphere in a moment of complex social change, and put pressure on the idea of modernity as unique and legitimate.

Concerning these tensions, Ochoa Gautier explains,

Rather than a binary division between tradition and modernity, or thinking of tradition as a backdrop of modernity, what we hear here is the multiple mediations enacting a constant relation between sonic transculturation and purification […]. Furthermore, this wreaks havoc in the colonial constitution of the idea of an Enlightened modernity as the dominant version of modernity. Aurality is thus a crucial site of constitution of the disencounters of modernities and the struggle between Enlightened and modernities otherwise is frequently a struggle between a lettered model of modernity that provincializes the aural and an aural otherwise in which ethnic heritage, class differences, sexual and gender inequalities become contested sites of sonic intervention and interpretation.\textsuperscript{363}

All these mediations and transculturations may be observed in the life of the carpas. The typical consideration of music as “simple entertainment” was probably the reason why authorities disregarded music acts that, like the “Gendarme y el pelado,” presented alternate, subversive visions of social empowerment. The study of such instances of musical pleasure allows us to observe how musical experience, in its sense as lived history, is concomitant to the intersections of gender, social classes, race and ethnicity.

Everyday music-making imposed a considerable pressure on the official agenda for modern Mexico by disclosing those expressive cultures that refused to disappear. Emplaced in the city, these practices illustrate the many ways in which culture can be both traditional and urban at the same time, regardless of whether tradition was manifested as resistance, or simply as persistence. The agency of the carpas community, whether intended or not, prompts us to consider the active role that quotidian cultural practices play in history’s continuity as well as in social change.

Ochoa Gautier has followed García Canclini in using the term “unequal modernities” to express how the inescapable project of modernity was asymmetrically experienced by different social groups. Based on Ochoa’s argument, but shifting it slightly, I prefer to use the term “failed

\textsuperscript{363} Ochoa Gautier, “Social Transculturación,” 400.
modernities” to stress the responses these different social groups had to a project that was asymmetrically experienced. While the term “inequality” highlights, for instance, the distance between the letrados and common people, between men and women, or between the privileged and non-privileged, the term “failed” simultaneously entails the existence of a dominant project as well as its malfunction. Be it a result of common people’s difficulty to adopt new (or imposed) cultural models, or as a consequence of their overt reluctance to do so, such failure highlights people’s agency as they perform sonic or embodied actions, as well as people’s freedom of thought, memory and musical imaginations. The term therefore not only reclaims the agency that common people had when confronting a local authority; but also, by readdressing attention to the failure of the project, it signals deviance from a unique model of modernity – a deviance which Ochoa identifies as “modernities otherwise” – thus disclosing the historiographic possibilities of musical stories unheard, but not silenced.
Chapter Four

Representation, Performance and the Rise of the Popular in the Carpas Shows

The pelado pertains to that social fauna of the lowest category and represents the human waste of the great city. In the economic hierarchy he is less than a proletarian, and in the intellectual one, [he is] a primitive.


Don’t you see it? In this country only two kind of people live: the pelados and those who imitate them, study them, and redeem them.

Alfonso Morales. *El país de las tandas.*

The controversial celebrations of the centennial of Independence and, a few days later, the fall of Díaz, announced the profound social transformations that were to happen. The armed conflict of 1910 prompted significant changes in common understandings of the “pueblo,” which also caused a generalized crisis of collective identity. However, if Porfirian society was in part characterized by a profound classism deeply tinged with racial undertones, after the Revolution, the patterns of social discrimination did not change much. The above quote by Samuel Ramos illustrates some of the ways in which the ideology of mestizaje effectively camouflaged its harmfulness by replacing racial prejudices with cultural ones. First published in 1934, Ramos’ influential essay *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México* [*The Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*] – now considered a classic philosophical study of the Mexican national identity – analyzed different cultural manifestations to claim that “the Mexican” had deeply

---


365 “Qué no ve que en este país nada más viven dos tipos de gentes: los pelados y los que viven de imitarlos, de estudiarlos, redimirlos.” Alfonso Morales imitating Cantinflas’ style, in Morales et.al. El país de las tandas: teatro de revista 1900-1940 (México, D.F.: Coyoacán, México/ Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares, Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1986), 46. (The book “País de las tandas” resulted from a research project concerned with the revista shows and sponsored by the Museo Nacional de Culturas Populares in 1984. The project also included a number of re-releases of historic recordings.)
internalized a sense of inferiority with respect to the European culture. Ramos considered the marginal members of society in the 1920s and 1930s, and naming them “pelados,” used them as a synecdoche to analyze the Mexican people at large. In his view, the pelado was “the most elemental and clearly defined expression of national character.”\textsuperscript{366} An influential public figure, Ramos’ views were widely read among educated people, and by the last two decades of the twentieth century his ideas became instilled in the general population as part of the local imaginary of “the Mexican.”\textsuperscript{367} As a result, for most of the second half of the twentieth century the idea that the pelados were not only poor but also “intellectually primitive” was generally accepted.\textsuperscript{368}

The second quote by Alfonso Morales, a historian of revista shows, is suggestive in that it acknowledges the existence of the pelados in society. However, in a clever rhetorical trick, Morales opposes – or ambiguously equates – the pelados with the actors that “imitate them” as well as with the intellectuals who “study and redeem them.” With this he suggests that beyond being characterized by his social condition, the pelado is an enactment, or as I argue following Roger Bartra, a cultural trope.

Social obsession with the pelados – an updated version of the nineteenth century term \textit{léperos} – was most evident in the early twentieth century. It also manifested as musical theater. Comedy helped the common citizen to make sense of their position \textit{vis-a-vis} the changing demographics of the city, not only by assisting people in assimilating the changes already

\textsuperscript{366} Ramos, \textit{El perfil del hombre}, 52.

\textsuperscript{367} Ramos was appointed Minister of Education in 1932, and chair of the “Department of Intellectual Collaboration” of the same institution. From 1944 to 1952 was the chair of the Philosophy department of the National University and, from 1954 to his death in 1959, he was the dean of Humanities at the same Institution.

\textsuperscript{368} It was not until the 1990s that Ramos’ views were contested by many other authors, initiating a continued debate over the symbolic effects of the pelado in the Mexican culture. This debate however, has happened in a reduced circle of intellectuals invested in the project of postcolonial critique and decolonial thought. Therefore, common understandings of the pelado, have more or less prevailed among the Mexican common citizens.
consummated, but also, in some cases, catalyzing further social transformations. In this context, the archetypes of the “popular subject” found in the city were turned into stock characters for stage purposes. Allegedly appealing to the popular taste, companies that performed in formal theaters as well as in carpas shows crafted these stock characters in terms that were degrading and disenfranchising for those they claimed to represent, thus contributing to the perpetuation of their structural marginalization. This is most evident in the character of the pelado and in the undifferentiated figure of the peasant/indian.

The question of what constitutes “the popular” in music has been of concern to music scholars in recent years. In particular, the issue of representation (understood both as a depiction and as political representation) has remained a central concern. Whether or not those referred to in musical works as “the people” (el pueblo) identify with such characterizations, and whether or not these people have power to voice their own concerns and/or to contest the official culture, are the problems that ignite the debate. The development of this line of inquiry is relevant to assessing and revising the historization and narratives of the carpas shows and their related musical practices.

In this chapter, I examine how staged musical representations associated with the carpas may have had some resonance among their audiences, in the sense that Spivak indicates as Darstellung, as well as the extent to which notions about those who made up the “poor classes” [“las clases proletarias,” “los pobres,” “las masas,” “los sectores mayoritarios”] were effectively instilled in the

---

369 To some, the rise of music as a commodity marks the beginning of “popular” music as opposed to “literate.” A historical perspective on the rise of the “popular” in Europe was developed by Derek B. Scott, in whose study he devotes special attention to music composed for the stage, as well as to the development of the market of musical entertainment and the rise of big urban centers. As he explains, these factors intertwined to create the conditions for the emergence of what he terms the “Popular Music Revolution.” Derek B. Scott, Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Another salient work that has addressed the problem of representation is illustrated by Richard Middleton, Voicing the Popular : On the Subjects of Popular Music (New York: Routledge, 2006). In the case of Latin America, the work of Juan Pablo González, with alleged aspirations to explain the music of this cultural region, exemplifies a similar tendency to associate the popular with the music industry, a tendency most influenced by the rise of pop culture studies. Juan Pablo González, Pensar la música desde América Latina: Problemas e interrogantes, (Santiago: Universidad Alberto Hurtado, 2013). Academic opposition to similar appraisals caused that in 2010 the 10th Biannual Conference of the IASPM- Latin American branch was held around the issue of defining the popular in Music.
population of Mexico City. I argue that music assisting such theatrical representations responded to a lineage of representation of marginal or non-hegemonic identities that dated back to colonial times, and even to times that predated the European colonial expansion in America. These traditions represented peripheral identities by recourse to preexisting cultural tropes, using them as mechanisms to construct a social and cultural “Other.” Performers used these stock characters, and the music that went along with them, to provoke laughter as a symbolic strategy to undermine these identities’ power to destabilize the status quo. I complicate the reception of such depictions by addressing the performance of the audience, and by questioning whether or not such demeaning representations were accepted to stand as instances of political representation – Vertretung. Among these characters, I devote special attention to the “pelado” and how he could have been used to subvert and/or perpetuate social representations of the urban marginal.

The difference between the “performatic” – as the intrinsic theatrical qualities of any given text – and the “performative” – how a particular enactment can engender a number of responses among those who attested it – assists understanding of this modality of musical theater, of its effects on society and of its subsequent appropriation by audiences for political purposes. As Alejandro Madrid has argued, “to understand musical texts and musical performances in their own terms according to a social and cultural context, a performance studies approach to the study of music asks what music does or allows people to do.”

This chapter, therefore, focuses on the intersections

---

370 Under the lens of early postcolonial scholarship certain social groups in Mexico, (Indians, peasants, urban workers, immigrants) could be categorized as the “subaltern” given their reduced power of political representation. In order to better explain the problem of political versus theatrical representation, the distinction between what subaltern scholarship has termed Vertretung – as in political representation – and Darstellung – for what concerns portraits, depictions, images – proves useful. According to Gayatri Spivak the subaltern is confined to an axiomatically voiceless position, therefore, their needs, desires and complaints had to be voiced by someone else with greater power of political representation (Vertretung) and able to mediate with authorities. The resulting images cannot possibly be realistic; rather they are a reflection of the ideas of those who perceived and had the means to imprint their impressions. Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

between the field of performance studies and postcolonial critique to assess the emergence of the “popular” as an enactment, as well as the agency of actors and audiences of the carpas to embrace or contest such enactment.

To address the gaps among the music’s textual content, the plot, the dialogues, and some performative elements, I have recourse to the difference between the “archive” and the “repertoire” as proposed by Diana Taylor. Complementary to one another, these theoretical devices allow exploration of cultural memories that could not be otherwise narrated.\textsuperscript{372} “Archival” memory, Taylor claims, exists in the form of documents, of physical-recorded evidence, used officially for governability purposes.\textsuperscript{373} Kept in the form of reports to the Ayuntamiento office, in press accounts, in music scores and in the form of testimonies, the existing documents about the musical shows performed in theaters, and by extension in the carpas, facilitate access to the historian in the first place. The “repertoire,” by contrast, is a mechanism to perform, instead of inscribe, cultural memories; it “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing, - in short all of those acts usually thought of as ephemeral. Repertoire, etymologically ‘a treasury, an inventory,’ also allows for individual agency.”\textsuperscript{374} These ephemeral acts that make up the “repertoire” of the carpas are to be inferred from the archive.


\textsuperscript{373} “Archival” memory exists as documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDS, all those items supposedly resistant to change. Archive, from the Greek, etymologically refers to a “public building,” a place were records are kept. From \textit{arkhe}, it also means a beginning, the first place, the government.” Taylor, \textit{The Archive and the Repertoire}: 19.

\textsuperscript{374} Idem, 20.
Revista Shows and the Popular in Music.

During the years of the Revolution, the revista musical was a favorite musical theatre genre among the audiences that lived in the capital city, and one much preferred at the carpas shows. The revista's characteristic political commentary – which targeted the political class of the Revolution made these shows especially attractive during the 1910s and 1920s. Like many preceding forms of Hispanic comic theater, the revista musical was met with the condescension of educated writers, inspectors and councilors, who mostly considered the genre lacking in any artistic merit and hence “vulgar.” The following report presented by Inspector Samper, who we met in chapter three, is a case in point.

Months after he despaired trying to listen to Beethoven’s Kreutzer sonata, Inspector Samper was instructed to attend the Teatro Lírico and see the premier performance of the revista musical Agua le pido a mi Dios (“To my God I ask for water”). After his visit, he reported that:

The authors of this play are Mr. A. Guzmán Aguilera and M. Rivera Paz. This cannot be considered more than an improvisation, just as is to be understood by the title. It is arranged in three entirely popular scenes, and its craft is as vulgar and unscrupulous as are all those that have been performed in this coliseum. The plot: A Neptune, a gendarme and a charrro [a folk horseman] tour the city in times of a water shortage and [encounter a] successive parade of old-fashioned water-sellers, villagers at a crossroads, two Chinese laundrymen, an Arab poet, etc. The dances are the same old charros and Chinas [poblanas], the fox, [foxtrot] and the cuplés of the ducks. The play, from all points of view, is of the worst quality, which is to say, just like all of its kind. There is nothing to be praised, and in what concerns censorship, I noted the following: a dialogue between a pelado and a drunken woman, in which he says that “to dry bombs, she ate beans and dried them with three torpedoes and she should pass this remedy to the city council so they too can dry the bombs with wind.” In this and

---

375 Nowadays the charro figure is widely known as the iconic Mexican man. His pervasiveness in Mariachi ensembles as well as his distinctive attire inspired in the typical dress of Salamanca, have contributed to its easy identification. However in the late nineteenth century the charro – a traditional horseman – was a figure of debate over its uses in theatre. Due to his connection with rural life, the charro was depicted as representing the peasants. However, he was either the landlord or his first man. The charro therefore had a social status that was diametrically opposed to that of peasants.

376 China Poblana attire is considered the Mexican traditional dress, and women wearing it are so referred. An example of this dress can be seen in figure 4.2.

377 This phrase is a pun: the Spanish word “torpedos” contains the word “pedos” (farts).
other scenes, one can hear expressions such as ‘jijos’ followed by other words that barely hide the [bad] intentions. Neither the night I saw the play nor last night did I notice anything to be censored in the ducks cuplé. But I have been told that yesterday they inserted verses saying that a mayor in love exploited a bomb of a Countess. That was at least the idea of the cuplé as it was described to me.”

This report illustrates the changes in the ways the local administration dealt with leisure activities in the city. Since the start of operations of the Council of Arts and Culture in October 1922, the inspectors were not only expected to report about plays’ political offense or moral appropriateness, but also to judge their “artistic merits.” To accomplish this goal, the city council had replaced old inspectors with those that the mayor and his collaborators considered “most apt and knowledgeable in cultural matters.” The fact that Inspector Samper was not one of the inspectors so replaced explains his interest in judging this revista’s “artistic quality.” By so doing, he would justify his permanence in his job as an “apt” inspector, while also preserving his own personal status as an educated man. Besides, as officially described, his report, would serve to appease official preoccupations over potentially immoral or inconvenient messages.

---

378 “Jijos,” a colloquial version of “hijos” (sons), is also used as an expression to show surprise. It can also be as an abbreviation of “hijos de la chingada,” a typical Mexican curse.

379 Seemingly the expression was an idiom in use at the time, and masked as a pun, to hide the implied joke that the mayor was the Countess’ pimp.

380 “Son autores de la obra los señores A. Guzmán Aguilera, y M. Rivera Paz. No puede considerarse sino como una improvisación, tal como se comprende por el título. Está hecha en tres cuadros netamente populares y su factura es tan vulgar y poco escrupulosa como todas las que se han visto en el mencionado coliseo. ¿El Pretexto? Un Neptuno, un gendarme y un charro, recorren la capital cuando es mayor carestía del agua, y sucesivamente desfilan los aguadores antiguos, la gente del pueblo en una encrucijada, dos chinos (lavanderos), un árabe poeta, etc. Y como bailailes el de los eternos charros y chinas [poblanas], el fox, y los cuplés de los patos. La obra, desde todos los puntos de vista es de pésima calidad, es decir, de acuerdo con las de su género. Nada tiene pues, digno de elogio, y en cuanto a censurable, anote lo siguiente: un diálogo entre un pelado y una ebria, en el cual se dice que ‘ella para sacar bombas comió frijoles y las sacó con tres torpedos: que le pase el remedio al Ayuntamiento para que nos seque las bombas con el viento.’ En este y otros cuadros se prodigan exclamaciones a base de ‘jijos’ seguidos de tales cuales palabras que mal disimulan la intención. La noche que presencié la obra no encontré nada que debiera censurarse en los cuplés de los patos, ni anoche. Pero tengo noticias de que en la tarde de ayer insertaron versos en que se habla de que ‘un alcalde enamorado explotaba a una bomba de Condesa...’ al menos esa era, según se me dijo, la idea del cuplé.” Italics are mine. “Informes sobre la obra de Teatro Lírico titulada ‘Agua le pido a mi Dios.’” AHDF- SDP, Vol 812. File 1758 (1922).

Inspector Samper was not particularly concerned about anything “serious” that needed to be censored in this revista musical. Instead, he belittled it by considering it a “simple improvisation” unworthy of any serious attention. In addition, while expressing greater preoccupation about rumors about a cuplé that alluded to one politician, he also declared that there was nothing offensive enough to be banned. The fact that revistas musicales were offered as often in the smaller established theaters as they were in the carpas was part of the official concern for the “popularization” of theater. Possibly, this inspector and other self-appointed “cultured” people in the city may have been uncomfortable as a result of specific scenes and dialogues which, for example, included allusions to lower-body functions, or language that they considered unrefined (such as “jijos”).

Inspector Samper’s report also shows that these shows deployed stock characters to depict stereotypically some of the social types inhabiting the city: a gendarme, a charro, a Chinese laundryman, an Arab poet, chinas poblanas, one pelado, and a drunken woman. Inspector Samper did not fail to notice how discursive elements between the characters of the pelado and the drunken woman, for example, were sufficiently vulgar to fail to meet the standards of spoken culture and civility the elites most valued. In contrast, he did not include any details about physical gestures in his report. Such omission may be due to his consideration that this show was “as vulgar as all of those performed at the Coliseum,” and “entirely popular”, thus appraising vulgarity as a) inherently linked to the “popular,” and b) self-evident, and thus undeserving of any further description.

In sum, Inspector Samper, an admirer of Beethoven’s music, belittled the artistic merit of this musical show by labeling it as “entirely popular” and “vulgar.” Just as the opinions of inspectors determined the legal characterization of the theater-jacalones and could lead to legal action against the shows, so too their aesthetic judgments were decisive in defining which
musical practices counted as trivial, unimportant and, in the long term, as “popular,” regardless of the kind of theater in which they were performed. Adjectives such as “artistic,” “vulgar,” “praiseworthy” or simply “insignificant” were commonly used to describe some of these musical practices, and then in turn to connect them to people associated with certain social classes.

In most cases, figures of authority considered these shows simply “amusing;” they seldom admitted in explicit terms the fear these musical comedies also inspired among the social elites and the ruling class. Such fear was all the more present after the end of the armed phase of the Revolution in 1920. Although the new political leaders repudiated the authoritarianism that characterized the Porfiriato, censorship and control over the music performed in theaters of the city was taking place in full force.

The Historiography of the Popular and the Carpas

Whereas Inspector Samper disregarded the show as “an improvisation,” the spontaneity of this ephemeral act invites us to inquire into instances of fleeting, even fictional, empowerment of the marginal sectors. This historiographical problem merits further attention.

The issue of what made the carpas shows “popular” has merited relatively little scholarly attention. In Mexico, studies of popular culture began with Carlos Monsiváis. As early as 1978, he tackled the question of how “popular” culture came to be in the context of modern Mexico City. His initial definition of “popular culture” was grounded on a diversity of urban expressions

\[382\] Anyone debating the public acclaim of these carpas repertory in tandem with their associations with the low classes would find herself at a conundrum when using the term “popular.” To address this problem, and still make a distinction between the welcoming reception that certain music genres enjoyed and the class associations they prompted, I opt for using the unmarked term, popular, to imply these shows were broadly liked, while reserving the use of the term in scare quotes in cases when I am referring to connotations of social class.
associated with what he called the “majority classes” \([\text{clases mayoritarias}]\).\(^{383}\) During the first half of the twentieth century, Monsiváis maintained that these expressions included the music hall, revistas musicales, the carpas shows, dance halls and bullfights—venues that the nascent local entertainment industry had co-opted and manipulated during the 1940s and 1950s. Embodied in radio, film and television (which this author calls “the cultural industry”), these expressions helped instill a sense of social cohesion.\(^{384}\) In regards to the carpas and the music hall, Monsiváis addressed the emergence of stock characters by arguing that the theatricalization of everyday life in the revistas performed at theaters and carpas shows allowed the enactment of contrasting moral values between social classes.

Taking a Marxist approach, Monsiváis grounded his interpretation on two axioms: first, the dominant classes and the majority classes are two opposed, monolithic entities and, second, the entertainment industry is an ideological apparatus of the State in the most Althusserian of senses. As a result, he ascribed particular moral values to each class as if these attributes came intrinsically and naturally. Moreover, in his view, the entertainment industry is an uncontestable institution that overpowers people’s agency. Monsiváis concluded that “popular culture was the product of the desires of the dominant classes” and the result of an ideological displacement. Such displacement, in


\(^{384}\) Monsiváis’ definition reveals a sense of political imperative, also hinting at the political history of other Latin American countries. “What we now know as ‘popular culture’ is the result of a long process – in many senses common to most Latin American countries, and in many other common to the rest of the world – through which by using technological innovations, a process of ideological domination displaces and oppresses attempts to preserve a tradition, to build artistic an cultural singularity. Such ‘singularity’ takes advantage of the first impulses of the cultural industries, remains for a few years (notably from 1930-1950) and produces ambiguous myths and original products that, be as they may, are quickly assimilated by massive consumption and which turns them into ‘popular culture.’ (‘Lo que hoy conocemos como "cultura popular" es el resultado de un largo proceso - en muchos sentidos, común a la mayoría de los países latinoamericanos, y en muchos otros, común al resto del mundo - mediante el cual a partir de las innovaciones tecnológicas, un proceso de dominación ideológica desplaza y opime los intentos de mantener una tradición, de erigir una "singularidad" cultural y artística. Tal "singularity," aprovechándose del primer impulso de una industria cultural, se mantiene unos años (notoriamente el periodo 1930-1950) y produce mitos ambiguos y productos originales que, surjan como surjan, son asimilados con celeridad por la avidez masiva que los torna cultura popular.’) Monsiváis, “Notas sobre cultura popular en México”: 98.
Monsiváis’ ideas predate the notion of “ventriloquism” put forth by Richard Middleton in the decade of the 1990s. Middleton argued that music is first and foremost a social practice that articulates representations of different social categories, such as class, gender, and ethnicity. Since those social actors who have access to the means of representation created and distributed these categories, all social representations of “the people” do not constitute the “people’s voice” per se, but are rather mediated and “voiced” through the interpretations of the dominant class. This condition, which he called “ventriloquism,” means that the social denunciations, intentions and desires of so-called “popular subjects” are voiced by the educated men, who in turn base their judgment on their imagining of a “lower” otherness. This construction is achieved through enactments of “the popular” determined by the ever-troublesome interactions between the higher and the lower classes.

While agreeing with these two authors’ acknowledgements of the asymmetries entailed in interactions between the two social groups, I think both interpretations place too much emphasis on the polarity between them and on the disenfranchised position of the majorities. As a result, “popular” people affected by representations that supposedly depict them seem not to have any strategies for overturning them or agency for contesting such asymmetric social order. Neither of

---

385 Monsiváis acknowledges the existence of an alternate notion of “popular” class to which he ascribes “authenticity” and which, in his view, manifests political and social resistance. However, he sustains, the “symbolic activities of these radicalized classes” do not have the media power to distribute their ideology and therefore cannot be compared with the “imperialist influence of mass culture.” His argument is thus built around his working definition of popular class. Idem.

386 “These developments (of ventriloquism, and imitations and enactments of the “popular”) mightily complicate our understanding of the social semiotic space within which popular voices circulate[d] . We can be certain that […] the “low” was not without its own voices. But they come to us through the screen of class and historical distance, and may often seem hard to hear, all that is documented are hybrids and mediations. This is true even when the lower classes appear to speak in a less equivocal way, on their own account. […] Even in such cases, the positions occupied have always already been infiltrated by forces from outside, defined by their location in the field as a whole and by the interplay between them and their socio-musical protagonists.” Richard Middleton, Voicing the Popular, 22.
these two authors consider the possibility that attributes of any given social class, or for that matter “the popular,” could be actions, attitudes or gestures performed contextually, instead of attributes that “naturally” emerge from a material condition.

The influence of neo-Marxism as a leading historiographic perspective among leftist Latin American intellectuals in the 1970s and 1980s accounts for such dichotomy in Monsiváis’ thinking. These historical narratives depicted the high classes as all-powerful and impassable, and the lower classes as subordinated, disenfranchised and voiceless. As a result, the well-intentioned attempts to denounce the official racism and internal colonialism and to vindicate the working class, were limited by Monsiváis’ assumption about the supposed lack of agency of an also supposedly passive community.

In 2000, Monsiváis revisited his conception of “popular culture.” He restated his belief on the elites’ greater power of representation, yet he redefined the “popular” as a movable set of cultural expressions that the elites of any culture neglect, considering them “non-prestigious.”

Contextualizing the definition of the “popular” in entertainment activities before, during and after the Revolution (1900-1940s), Monsiváis noted that this was a time of intense change during which “the masses” mobilized; therefore the tradition of what counted as the popular was reconfigured. Monsiváis thus defined “popular culture” as

the sum of tendencies, creations, characters, attitudes, devotional practices, informal institutions, marginal fashion trends, community preferences, [and] repositories of oral culture. Traits that are first deemed typical and eventually idiosyncratic, [such as] musical currents, gastronomical rituals; in sum, everything initially lacking in prestige and thus rejected by the elites over matters of quality or status, and which the so-called “folk” [vulgo], sponsors, fortifies, modifies, and consecrates as a stimulus for everyday life as well as for sentimental outbursts.


388 “Es la suma de tendencias, creaciones, personajes, actitudes, prácticas devocionales, instituciones informales, modas marginales, predilecciones comunitarias, depósitos de cultura oral, rasgos que primero se juzgan típicos y luego idiosincráticos, corrientes musicales, rituales gastronómicos: en síntesis, la suma de todo lo carente de prestigio en sus inicios y que las élites rechazan por cuestiones de calidad o estatus, y el así llamado vulgo auspicia, fortalece, modifica y consagra como estímulo de la vida cotidiana y del arrebato sentimental.” Monsiváis [2000], 143.
There are two aspects of great significance in his updated definition the “popular”. First, Monsiváis recognized the agency of the “so-called ‘folk’” [el vulgo] in using, transforming, appropriating and reinforcing such cultural manifestation. Second, he emphasized everyday life as the milieu where such processes occur.

If the agency of people like the carpa actors and audiences was neglected in his first critical writings on popular culture, in his later text Monsiváis recognized the influence of quotidian actions to contest hegemonic culture. Nevertheless, he still conceded the elites the final say in defining the popular. In this chapter, I seek to illustrate the ways in which the carpas shows could have fostered contestatory quotidian actions, by recourse to a different historiographical perspective. Postcolonial perspectives on performance and representation can shed light on the retaliatory power of actions by which actors and audiences responded to the established order and to processes of socio-political transformation.

Another issue with Monsiváis’ characterization of the carpas shows concerns his historic periodization. Because the earlier phase of the carpas has remained unproblematized with respect to the second, the conditions of performance and reception during the earlier years of these shows have been omitted as determinant factors in assessing the degree of political agency of carpa actors and audiences before the official Nationalistic movement began in the 1920s. With memories of the second phase of the carpas as the sole reference, the issue of representation has been exclusively framed within the State project of the post-revolutionary leaders. Scholars have mostly depicted the nascent industry of entertainment as an invincible and uncontestable ideological apparatus. Further, they have identified the ideology of mestizaje as the foundation of the internal colonialism of the
State, which they blamed for the resulting demeaning representations of social groups such as Indians, peasants and the urban working classes.\textsuperscript{389}

Lastly, I must add that narratives of staged representations of popular characters in the early carpas shows, such as those of Monsiváis, have rarely addressed their historical continuity with preexistent forms of Hispanic theatre. This tendency gives the extant historiography of the carpas shows an unrealistic sense of historical exceptionality. Scholars of the carpas have not analyzed them in relation to historical contexts where the strategic deployment of stereotypical characters was used to mark social groups or to contest the \textit{status quo}. This omission obscures existing parallels between the carpas and other, earlier forms of Hispanic theater. The political agendas of actors at the end of the nineteenth century thus have been equated to those of the actors in the early twentieth century. Consideration and historical contextualization of the earlier uses of stock characters allows observing that the political agendas of the earlier period of the carpas shows (pre-revolution, more or less) were different from the later manifestations, specially those during and after the revolution.

\textbf{Historical sketch of Theatrical Representation of the Marginal and the Popular}

One of the earliest and most evident manifestations of the representations of non-normative identities in Hispanic lyric theater is the “character villancico,” a variety of Spanish villancico (a strophic song with some dramatic interchanges) that represented the physical and moral qualities characteristic of certain ethnic groups considered “foreign” or marginalized. These included, for example, Galicians, Gypsies, Portuguese, Moors, and French.\textsuperscript{390} In Spanish Golden Age theater,  


\textsuperscript{390} According to Bernardo Illari the villancico can be conceived as a meta-genre with a medley of local, thematic, functional and stylistic variations. One of these functions was to portray cultural and ethnic differences in the midst of a heterogeneous cultural environment. Bernardo Illari, “The popular, the sacred, the colonial and the local: the performance of identities in the villancicos from Sucre,” in Tess Knighton and Álvaro Torrente ed., \textit{Devotional Music in the Iberian World, 1450-1800} (Hampshire- Burlington: Ashgate, 2007).
these groups of people exhibited characteristic dialects (“faulty” when opposed to the norms of literate Spanish), as well as features such as naivety, gullibility, a love of getting drunk, a love of dancing, excessive sexual drive, and other similar negative qualities. A subgroup of this type of villancico was the “villancico de negros” – also called negrilla and guineo- which depicted the lives and habits of black people living under the Spanish monarchy. In this context, the black character became a product of the literate members of the enlightened European society. The black “essence” was elaborated from stereotypical features that white literate men wanted to find always and unequivocally in their complementary “other.” The distinguishing feature of villancicos de negros is the broken language of the black characters, supposedly representing phonetic elements of African languages. The use of this imaginary language is as old as the trade of black slaves in Spain. Frida Weber de Kurlat points out that “The apparition of the black character, unto whom a broken and distorted language is imposed, dates back to even the fifteenth century, and can be found in the Cancionero compiled by García de Resende in 1516, but which includes compositions previous to this publishing date.”

Through constant use of specific comic situations and constant reference to his condition of slavery, the black character became an object of white laughter, very suitable for comic purposes in theater. As a result, the literary image of the black reinforced this group’s subordinate social position.

Baltasar Fra Molinero, a scholar of Spanish literature, has claimed that, unlike other marginal social groups, blacks were blatantly shown as disenfranchised people with no collective identity due

---

to the enslaved condition that they endured in Spain.\textsuperscript{393} I do not entirely agree with his view, because the fact that playwrights cared enough about black people to depict them in comic representations is already a sign of the potential menace they represented and the angst they inspired. The derisive treatment of marginal characters, as some performance scholars have argued, cannot possible take root or provoke laughter without some element of social fear.\textsuperscript{394}

After the Spanish cultural occupation of the Americas, and the spread of Catholicism in Indian territory, the character villancicos were adapted to the new colonies, where they not only captured a moment of great “cultural explosion” but also served to renew a tradition of representation of the “other.”\textsuperscript{395} When not sung in vernacular Indian languages, ethnic villancicos in the American colonies usually depicted native Indians, using linguistic distortions with a purpose similar to that underlying their use in guineos. Ethnic villancicos and negrillas were performed in religious Christmas plays locally called \textit{pastorelas} [shepherd stories] with the purpose of Religious conversion. Since some aspects of the native Mexican cultures were represented, the pastorelas also served as a tool for cultural assimilation to the Catholic church. In this new context, the ethnic

\textsuperscript{393} “The black in literature is not seen as a threat because he is alone; he does not pertain to a social group with an internal cohesiveness as other minorities (Jewish, Moors or Gypsies). Because they were mostly slaves, they did not have, social or economic power able to cause fear or preoccupation. A group of individuals without power was seen as equal to a group of children, and as children the White majorities wanted to see them. Laughter and comic tones were the literary answers to black slavery, who were represented as funny and innocent characters” (“El negro en la literatura, no es visto como una amenaza porque está solo; no pertenece a un grupo social con cohesión interna como las otras minorías (judíos, moriscos o gitanos). Los negros, por razón de ser en su gran mayoría esclavos, no poseían poder social o económico digno de causar miedo o preocupación. Un grupo de individuos sin poder era equiparable a un grupo de niños, y como niños los quería ver la mayoría blanca. La risa y el tono humorístico fueron las respuestas literarias a la esclavitud de los negros, que eran representados como seres graciosos e inocentes.”) Baltasar Fra Molinero, \textit{Op. cit}, 3.

\textsuperscript{394} Both Tomlinson and Bloechl have addressed how native singing in American lands inspired decisive fears that favored transformations in Western music. See Tomlinson (2007), Bloechl, (2008) \textit{Op. cit}. Likewise, in the field of performance studies, a number of performance artists such as Guillermo Gómez Peña, Coco Fusco, Jesusa Rodríguez, have derisively used fear as the affective raw material to disclose the ways in which cultural otherness threatens hegemonic culture. For documented performances by Gómez Peña see \texttt{www.lapochanostra.com}; for analytical studies of his performances and those of similar artists see Taylor, \textit{Op. cit}.

\textsuperscript{395} I borrow the term “cultural explosion” from Iuri Lotman, who considers that the processes of cultural change may occur in one of two coexistent models: the first is gradual, and the second is explosive. These two models regulate all realms of human activity and their interactions guarantee the continuity and innovation of culture. Yuri Lotman, \textit{Cultura y explosión: lo previsible y lo imprevisible en los procesos de cambio social} (Barcelona: Gedisa Editorial, 1999).
villancicos not only served a similar ostracizing function as the Spanish character villancico, but also—a double-edge-sword—contributed to integrating native social groups to the narratives of Christianity.396

Other symbolic forms played significant roles in shaping the ways Mexicans conceived of the social stratum and of those who occupied the lower ranks. The pictorial genre known as pintura de castas (caste paintings), depicted different interracial marriages and offspring thus aiding processes of social and ethnic representation. Because these paintings also portrayed groups of people performing certain activities, they not only legitimated the visual classification of colonial subjects, but also contributed to prescribing people’s occupations. Further, they shaped models of social division of labor and social interactions between these stratified groups.397 Later in the nineteenth century, the advent of photography in the hands of anthropologists and ethnographers contributed a great deal to the ongoing construal of the social identities of groups of people, most saliently Indians.398 In a way, commercial photography updated the pictorial tradition of castas paintings by means of staging portraits of the “popular types” of the Mexican society.399


397 The pictorial genre pintura the castas has proven an important tool for scholars in different disciplines to interpret the many ways in which the colonial society was represented and organized. For some postcolonial interpretations of this pictoric genre see for example the exhibit catalogue, Ilona Katzew; John A. Farmer; Roberto Tejada; Falomir Faus Miguel, eds. New World Orders : Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996). For critical essays on this matter see Ilona Katzew and Susan Deans-Smith, Race and Classification: The Case of Mexican America (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).


399 Similar visual catalogues are still produced today to classify Mexican people into social classes. See for example the illustration and photography books, Ricardo Cortés Tamayo, Tipos populares de la ciudad de México (México: Secretaría de Obras y Servicios, 1974); _____. Las Mexicanos se pintan solos (México: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Subsecretaría de Asuntos Culturales, 1960); Daniela Rosell, Barry Schwabsky and Luis Gago, eds. Ricas y famosas (Madrid, España: Turner
Literature, especially the supposedly realist genre known as *costumbrismo*, also solidified the social imaginaries of the marginal, especially of Mexican Indians. Moreover, because the peasantry and Indian groups have been historically intertwined in Mexico, *costumbrista* novels directly affected social representations of indigenous groups, portraying them not only as disenfranchised but also as unable to decide and act for themselves. These representations suited well the predatory agrarian politics of the Porfirian regime. In the early twentieth century, the Revolutionary novel rejuvenated many of the sociolinguistic stereotypes already made familiar by nineteenth century *costumbrismo.*

At the time the carpas shows expanded in Mexico City, minstrel shows from the Southern United States were depicting African Americans as similarly disenfranchised. These shows construed a group identity located in their historic condition of slaves. The familiar topic of the plantation, which often resembled the Mexican *hacienda* of the Porfirian years, articulated a passive-aggressive behavior hostile to white authority. Due to the geographic proximity, some travelling theater companies may have crossed the border between the two countries, cross-fertilizing these forms of musical representation of the marginal black and of the Indian/peasant.

Itinerant puppetry companies were also an important factor in creating and disseminating representations of marginal social types. With portable theaters and reduced production costs, these

---

400 A study of the literary elaboration of the Indian in nineteenth century literature was written by Conrado Gilberto Cabrera Quintero, *La creación del imaginario del indio en la literatura mexicana del siglo XIX* (México: Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, 2005). The influence of the revolutionary novel in updating these literary stereotypes was studied by Patricia Córdova Abundis, *Estereotipos sociolinguísticos de la Revolución mexicana* (México: Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de la Revolución Mexicana, 2000).

401 I have advanced a similar hypothesis about the musical exchange among travelling companies in the Caribbean and Latin American countries and proposed transnational dialogue about this particular topic. See Natalia Bieletto Bueno, "Teatro musical itinerante: hacia un diálogo trasnacional." *Boletín Música Casa de las Américas.* No. 35 (2013): 45-70. The topic of interactions between Mexican companies and American tent show companies, is one that needs further attention. While scholars such as Tomás Frausto-Ybarra and Yolanda Broyles-González or Peter Claire-Haney have written about the carpas shows in the southern United States, none of them have addressed the connection these companies may have had with Mexican companies or with similar American travelling companies of vaudeville also performing under tents.
companies toured the country during most of the nineteenth century. Performing in jacalones, many puppeteers exploited the characters that were later enacted by actors and actresses in the carpas shows. The siblings Rosete Aranda, managers of what was perhaps the most famous puppet company of the nineteenth century, declared to have targeted their plays to “relatives, Indians and peasants” thus crafting their characters so that they felt represented.\textsuperscript{402} The Vale Coyote, for example, was a discontent and opinionated marginal citizen, always sharp and severe in his critiques of contemporary politicians. He served as an inspiration model for the pelado of revistas musicales of the 1920s. As condensed symbols, all of the above social imaginaries generated the archetypes of the poor and the marginal that survived to the mid-twentieth century, shaping the theatrical forms that were most favored by Capitalino audiences, both in established theaters and in the carpas shows.

\textbf{Peasants as Marginal in the Zarzuelas de Género Chico}

The transculturation of the Madrilenian zarzuela to Mexico City allows us to explore how plots and characters could have been received in two different cultural contexts. The Hispanic ancestry of Mexican lyric theater can be traced down to the sainete (a one-act, mostly spoken comedy), the tonadilla (one act, mostly sung) and the zarzuela, particularly as they were developed in Madrid. Elisabeth Le Guin has meticulously illustrated how the tradition of representation of popular types in lyric theater, especially in the tonadilla, was enacted on stage in Madrid during the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{403} Many of the strategies for representing marginal characters in these theatrical piece originated from practices current during the Golden Age of Spanish literature, while also


incorporating cultural tropes from the Americas. Le Guin explains how musical genres such as the seguidillas and comic acts such as the sainete contributed to the stereotypical fixation of certain social types.

While the use of ancient stereotypical characters is characteristic of some forms of Spanish theatre as they were given in Mexico, the development of local theatrical stereotypes in Mexico City during the late nineteenth century is closely related to the subsidy that the local government extended for the production of a form of lyric theater called “género nacional” in the decade of the 1890s. These musical shows were intended to support the Porfirian nationalistic project. Structurally, they were much like the zarzuelas, except that local events inspired their topics and characters and their music was infused with traditional local genres such as sones, or medleys of danceable melodies known as jarabes.404

Because all these lyric genres were invested in representing vernacular forms of life, they employed comic characters that, adapted from their Madrilenian counterparts, served as markers of the local culture. This transculturation of music and dramatic character also worked in the opposite direction. In a musical exchange, some Spanish divas brought the Mexican repertory to Europe, and wore the iconic dress of the lands regions they had toured, as the figure labeled 4.1 illustrates.405

---

404 In his monograph of the jarabe, Gabriel Saldívar asserted that the jarabe was incorporated to the theatrical context since the first half of the nineteenth century. Gabriel Saldívar, El jarabe: Baile popular mexicano (México: Talleres gráficos de la Nación, 1937). Apparently, the jarabe became even more popular because in 1861 Niceto de Zamacois published a book with the wonderful and eloquent title El jarabe: Obra de costumbres mejicanas, jocosa, simpática, burlesca, satírica y de carcajadas, escrita para desterrar el mal humor, herencia que nos legó nuestro padre Adán por un necio antojo que quiso satisfacer, which contributed to solidify the imaginary of the jarabe as a dance genre to combat ill tempers. During the second half of the nineteenth century, composers such as José Antonio Gómez, Tomás León, Julio Ituarte and Miguel Rios Toledano, arranged sones and jarabes to be played as piano pieces. See, José Antonio Gómez, Varaciones sobre el tema del jarabe mexicano, 1841. Tomás León, Jarabe Nacional, Julio Ituarte, Ecos de México: Aires Nacionales, (published before 1890) or Miguel Rios Toledano, Colectión de Treinta jarabes, and ___. Aires Nacionales Mexicanos: Potpourri, Op. 558. (Mexico, D.F.: A. Wagner & Levien Sucs, s/r).

405 Roberto “El Diablo,” “La Mayendía se va de gira y se despide” in Revista de Revistas, 27 de Noviembre, 1921. The note includes a description of how she appropriated Mexican songs to her repertory.
The characteristic humorous scenes of preexisting Spanish zarzuelas were adapted to Mexican society in the “zarzuelas de género nacional. From the times of Porfirian nationalism, the carpas shows too deployed these typical social types. The pelado, the Indian-peasant, the policeman, the soldier, the *china poblana*, the politician (invested in a perpetual electoral campaign), and later, the Revolutionary fighter and his female analogue the *Adelita*, were all distinctive stock characters of these shows. Some carpa scholars have suggested that this array of marginal characters was subordinated to the imaginary of something like a “generic pelado.”

**Figure 4.1 The Spanish** Tonadillera Consuelo Mayendía, dressed in the iconic Mexican attire of “*china poblana.*” Published in *Revista de Revistas*, 1921.

---

406 Analyzing the carpas shows of chicano communities, Yolanda Broyles-González, for example, says that “We can include under the heading of peladita/peladito such stock characters as the penniless trickster, the down-and-out-indian, the recent immigrant, the infant, the naughty child, the indigent drunkard, the naïve country bumpkin (ranchero), or the altar boy, all of which populate the carpa tradition.” See Yolanda Broyles-González, *El Teatro Campesino*, 36.
Los Campesinos (“The Peasants”)

The peasant (campesino) or “payo” [a peasant who visits the city] was a recurrent character in Mexican lyric theater. I want to outline some of the connections this character may have kept with depictions of the peasant in Madrilenian zarzuelas. The género chico zarzuela Los Campesinos is found repeatedly in different parts of the carpas archive. The published score of this zarzuela informs that it was first performed in the Teatro de Apolo in Madrid the twelve of November in 1912. Following Spanish conventions of classifying theatrical forms, this short piece was titled “comic-lyric toy in one act and [written] in prose,” a phrase that emphasized the idea that género chico was trivial. In the published libretto, it was simply described as an adaptation of a “foreign story” by Miguel Mihura Álvarez and Ricardo González, a team that collaborated on numerous occasions to transform literary works into short comic pieces. Leo Fall composed the music, and Celestino Roig adapted the piece for the stage.⁴⁰⁷

⁴⁰⁷ Miguel Mihura and Ricardo González, Los Campesinos (Madrid: Sociedad de Autores Españoles, 1912).
A program note in Mexico from 1923 indicates that the itinerant companies José Jury and Cuadro México performed *Los Campesinos*, which was referred to as a “little opera in one act.” The show took place in the formal theater Ocampo, with provincial functionaries, perhaps from Hidalgo, sponsoring it. (Fig. 4.3) The stars of the companies were the tenor Pablo Garza and the *tiples* Lupe Nava and Chucha Camacho; the latter was beneficiary of the show. The program also included the popular *revista* “Las Musas del País” and a variety of jarabes and cuplés. In addition, and according to the expectations of the wealthy patrons, the theater offered “tequila with lime” before the show and during the intermission.

**Figure 4.3.** “Program for the género chico zarzuela *Los Campesinos*” [Carpas Documentary Collection CITRU.]

Five years later, *Los Campesinos* had moved to the carpas circuit. A detail from a photograph of the frontispiece of the “Carpas Variedades” in 1928 shows this lyric piece announced as part of its program. Significantly, the title of this work is misspelled in this carpa’s poster as *Los Campesinos*.
reinforcing opinions about limited or non-existent literacy among members of the carpas companies. This mistake, and the inference that might be made from it, suggest the possibility that, instead of reading the script and sticking to it, actors and actresses would have learned only the main elements of the plot and improvised the content of the dialogues.\textsuperscript{408} This would have naturally allowed a good deal of variation and allusion to local events ongoing in the city.

**Figure 4.4.** “Detail of the frontispiece of ‘Carpa Variedades’”

One of the salient social issues of the period after the Revolution was the increasing distinction between the rural and the urban. *Los Campesinos* is significant for its exploration of the ways in which depictions of the rural in Spain could have been transposed to the context that followed the peasant uprising in Mexico. Archival evidence of many performances of this piece suggest its popularity. It allegorically depicts the tensions between the urban and the rural through the encounter between the families of Alberto and Elena, a husband and wife with contrasting social

\textsuperscript{408} Le Guin too has offered an informed speculation about how illiteracy among Spanish tonadilleras may have been a reason that facilitated that they learned numerous and long scripts by heart. Due to the many similarities with the carpas shows, I consider her guesses on oral/aural learning of theatrical scripts to be easily applicable to this Mexican form of musical theater. Le Guin, *The Tonadilla…*, 63.
origins. Alberto, the son of a family of Asturian shepherds, has left the countryside and succeeded in becoming a prominent doctor in Madrid. Elena’s family (made up of Don Gabriel, Doña Victoria and Héctor, Elena’s older brother) represents the Madrilenian bourgeoisie, concerned with social appearances and the status quo. Unaware of his recent appointment as an academic, Alberto’s relatives travel to Madrid to visit him, bringing food and other “rustic” presents from the country. They call him “catedrático” – a convoluted term that highlights their linguistic inabilities.

In the third scene, the peasant group (made up of his godfather Alberto Patarrete, his father Mateo, his sister Olalla and Patarrete’s son Vicente) sings about the joy of reencountering Alberto to celebrate his success. The indications in the play request that Alberto’s family speak with “a strong Asturian accent.” As already explained in the first musical number, his family plan to pamper him with presents and their loving care. The script indicates that characters dance in this number. The manuscript of the score indicates “tiempo de marcha moderada” (moderato) while the lyrics say:

Patarrete: Adelante sin temor
Como en nuestra casa.
Mateo: Yo no puedo del temblor
Decir que me pasa.
Patarrete: De tu chico, el gran doctor
Tengo ya licencia.
Olalla: Pero entremos por favor
Vaya una opulencia!

Los Tres:
Aunque somos marusiños, marusiños
Me dan ganas de llorar al ver al niño
Y me da en las pantorrillas cosquilleo.

Olalla: Y yo tengo el corazón
Saltando de deseo.
Mateo y Patarrete:
¿Pues y yo? De la emoción
estoy que me mareo.

Los tres: Pero recobremos la tranquilidad.
Mateo (a Patarrete): Llámale.
Olalla: Ande usted.
Pat: Voy allá.
Mateo: Tarda ya.

Los tres:
Entre besos y caricias y apretones,
Al muchacho dejaré descuaturnao,
Porque han sido siempre nuestras

P: Come in without fear
As if in your own house.
M: Due my shivering, I cannot express
what is going on with me.
P: From your son, the great doctor
I have already my license
O: But please, let’s come in.
Oh! How opulent!

All three:
Although we are marusiños (from the
country), marusiños
I want to cry when I see this boy
and I feel ticklish in my calves.
O: And I have my heart jumping with
desire.
M and P:
And I?
I feel dizzy with emotion.
All three of them: Let us calm down.
M: Call him.
O: You do it.
Pat: I am coming.
Mateo: He is taking his time.
All three:
With kisses, caresses and squeezes
I will leave the boy breathless,
Because it has always been
Right from the introduction, the music of this dance is characterized by its melodic and harmonic simplicity. The chords are mostly tonic and dominant in B flat the initial dotted rhythm provides the song with a mischievous and innocent character, playfully oscillating between the regions of the dominant and the tonic.

Figure 4.5. Excerpt Transcription of the first dance of Los Campesinos

When the singing begins, the characters alternate, each taking a turn to express their emotions. Following prosodic conventions in musical theater, this arrangement favors understanding of the text over lyrical pomposity. Rejoicing in their feelings, they all sing in chorus: “Aunque somos marusiños, marusiños / Me dan ganas de llorar al ver al niño / Y me da en las pantorillas cosquilleo.” (Although we are marusiños, marisuños/ I want to cry when I see this boy/ And I feel ticklish in my calves).

As the characters elaborate on their sentiments, their verbal exchange becomes more disorganized and they interrupt one another. Musically, the superposition of their vocal lines achieves the effect of comic chaos (For the transcribed score see Appendix 12). When imagining the characters on stage, one can picture them rapidly moving from one side to the other, and even

---

409 Mihura and González, 13.
colliding, in the stage so as to depict the clumsiness caused by their overwhelming emotion at reencountering Alberto in his new prestigious position. Further, the melodic and harmonic simplicity allows for these characters to express their feelings with ease, serving as a musical allegory of the peasants’ supposed openheartedness. Meanwhile, the inelegance of their disrupted dialogue suggests their supposedly uncultivated state.

To please Alberto, his father Mateo brings a bagpipe, an instrument with strong pastoral connotations. Mateo played it all his life to pay for his son’s education. The father justifies playing the resounding instrument by declaring that, “if I play the bagpipe, [the customers] would save money by not having to hire other musicians.” If inappropriate for the context of the event, Mateo’s proposal to play the bagpipe inside the house, reveals both the importance that Mateo concedes to musicians in countryside community celebrations, as well how his musical skills are his source of pride.

A succession of comic entanglements, misunderstandings and mildly dramatic situations serve to highlight both the supposed idiosyncrasies of the “rural” lifestyle as well as the purportedly proud and disdainful “urban” attitude that, even if transiently, discloses Alberto’s conflicted shame about his origins. After a bittersweet confrontation between the two families, the story finds a happy end after Alberto’s repents for having denied his rural past and unconditionally defends his family in the face of his in-laws’ aggressions. The rational and mediating support of his wife Elena hints at the classic tradition of the marriage trope as symbolic of the reconciliation between two opposing parties. The moral of the story, which is also the most dramatic moment, comes when Mateo thanks Elena for her kindness and, invested in his fatherly role, gives a piece of advice to Alberto. With Catholic undertones, he asks his son to forgive his in-laws who “do not know better.”

---

Elena: No, padre; ni permito que se marchen ustedes, ni tolero que se desprecie así a la familia de Alberto. [...] es mi deber: él es mi marido y su familia es la mía.

Mateo: No, ya voy comprendiendo. Quédense todos. Ya veo mi falta. Perdón; me cegaba el deseo de abrazarte, yo no veo más que esto. Nosotros somos los que nos marchamos.

Elena: (Abrazándole) Usted no debe abandonarnos.

Mateo: (la abraza) Eso es digno de usted. (A Alberto) Quírela como ella se merece. Y a esos señores, que no comprenden lo que es educar a un hijo a costa de sudores y fatigas para verle hecho luego un caballero, perdónalos y na’mas. A mí me aguardan nuestras montañas.\footnote{Mihura and González, 30.}

After this dignifying moment, the script indicates that the orchestra should play very softly the melodic motif of the first musical number in which the family expressed their joy at visiting Alberto in the city. The faint reminiscence provokes the discrete tears of Alberto’s family until Héctor, who is Elena’s brother, apologizes for having been impulsive, a gesture which gains him his own father’s retaliation. This excerpt illustrates their dialogue:

Elena: (a sus padres) Son sencillos, pero no por eso debemos despreciarles.
Victor: Pero tu marido.
Elena: Su mayor gloria está en haber sabido elevarse.
Héctor: (estremecido y limpiándose las lágrimas) “Oh, y a una altura esferoidal! Alberto, perdón; aquí mi mano. (pasando a su lado) soy un impulsivo.
Gabriel: ¿Te pasas al enemigo?
Héctor: Me pase al lado de la razón.\footnote{Idem.}

The fact that the apologetic gesture comes from the wife’s young siblings and not from Alberto’s...
parents-in-law alludes to another, equally ingrained trope: that of attainment of justice through generational change. As a closing remark, the sweet sincerity of Olalla, Alberto’s sister, conveys the wisdom and simplicity of “rural common sense.” She ends with a metaphorical sentence about the “domestication of the beast” celebrating the kindness of heart that, she argues, characterizes peasants. The script states:

Olalla: La fiera está amansada por la dulzura, como se humanizan todas las fieras: tocándolas el corazón.
Héctor: Esta frase no es de loca.
Olalla: Y quien le dijo a usted que yo lo sea? Aquí no hay más que un sentimiento. Mucha rudeza, mucha ignorancia, Somos campesinos, pero tenemos el corazón así de grande.413
Olalla: The beast has been tamed by sweetness. The way that you humanize all the beasts: by touching their hearts.
Héctor: That is not a phrase a crazy woman would say.
Olalla: And who told you that I was one? Here there is nothing more than a feeling. Much toughness, much ignorance.
We are peasants, but we have hearts this big.

Through fiction and musical fantasy, the plot suggests aspirations for greater social justice through the recognition of peasants as well as a desire for social reconciliation between urban and rural cultures.

In 1923, Los Campesinos spoke to the Mexican audiences, who had been experiencing similar symbolic struggles between the urban and the rural since the end of the Porfirian regime and with the Revolution War. The conciliatory ending imagines new social interactions that are more empowering for a historically marginalized social group. As the literature historian Cayetano Cabrera Quintero points out: “The imaginary has a quality that is comparable with the ideological. While the latter tends to propel the action by shaping new contents in social relationships, the imaginary is often manifested as impulses – such as fears, anxieties, desires, dreams that are recreated or transformed, becoming vehicles of both new cultural spaces and unprecedented patterns of sociability.”414

413 Mihura and González, 31.
414 “Lo imaginario, tiene una cualidad comparable con lo ideológico. Éste tiende a impulsar la acción forjando nuevos contenidos en las relaciones sociales, mientras que lo imaginario se vierte con frecuencia en impulsos, - como miedos,
While the archives do not allow us to reconstruct most performatic elements in the Mexican stagings, there must have been some adjustments to make this story more accessible to local audiences. The region of Asturias could have been replaced with any region that Capitalino audiences associated with the rural, such as Tlaxcala, Hidalgo, and Morelos, among many others. The “strong Asturian accent”, for example, may have been substituted by one deemed as quintessentially “rural,” or by recourse to the theatrical conventions of signifying Indians by using broken Spanish, or by the characteristic northern accent that, thanks to the fame and popularity of revolutionary leader Pancho Villa, Mexico City’s people identified as “foreign” and “rural.” Similarly, the scarcity of musical evidence in the archives of both formal theaters and the carpas prevents us from assessing the extent to which Mexican productions respected the musical elements from the original Spanish script and score. Certain musical interventions may have been used before or after the peasants’ song scene. Such additions may have imbued the song with more local markers, for example by replacing the bagpipe with a chirimía or even with a violin, which is an instrument traditionally used to play sonecitos de la tierra.

And yet, despite of the well-intended conciliatory ending, the writers cannot escape their own historical conditioning. Alberto’s achievement consisted of having “elevated” himself from his previous “lower status” as the son of a shepherd musician, when he moved to the city and succeeded in the urban environment. This is symptomatic of the historicist model of progress at the start of the twentieth century, whereby the supposedly universal values of tolerance and forgiveness surmount the antagonism between the two life styles. When the urban wife acknowledges the worth and kindness of peasants, the writers endorse this historicist model of progress. The transcendence

---

angustias, deseos, sueños que son recreados o transformados, volviéndose conductores tanto de nuevos espacios culturales como de sociabilidades inéditas.” Cabrera Quintero, _La imagen del indio en la literatura del siglo diecinueve_, 34.

252
entailed in the act of “elevating” oneself encourages audiences to accept the rural as a “lower” and undesirable state, one that is nonetheless remedied through hard work and effort.

Serge Gruzinski has argued that early colonial institutional efforts to transform the imaginary and to instill new narratives and ideas were not enough to replace the preexisting ones. Instead, he proposed that such transformations were conditioned by the means available to enforce them.\textsuperscript{415} The agrarian reform, (1911) a new law that conceded ownership of land to those who worked it, caused many Mexicans to believe that real transformations were indeed feasible. Therefore, zarzuelas such as \textit{Los Campesinos} stopped being just imaginary, and gained greater legitimacy as auguries of better times. In this context, transcending the “low” condition of peasantry required only endurance and willingness to adjust to modern life. Or so people believed. Accordingly, the contributions of peasantry to social life were not only recognized but also extolled by the ideologues of the post-revolutionary Mexican government.\textsuperscript{416}

As Roger Bartra has explained, the imaginaries of the “hardworking peasant” would facilitate their exploitation by the State.\textsuperscript{417} The greatest contribution of peasants to Revolutionary Mexico thus consisted on working in favor of the State as befit their assigned “lower” position, acquired by birth and preserved by tradition.

\textsuperscript{415} Serge Gruzinski, \textit{Colonización de lo imaginario}, 196.

\textsuperscript{416} Such discourses, specially addressed to illiterate masses, were mainly communicated visually through the muralist movement whose main representatives – David Alfaro Siqueiros, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco - always sympathized with Communist ideals. Since they had the support of the new government, they could transmit such ideas about peasantry and workers. The alliance between muralist painters and post-revolutionary legislators has been studied by Alicia Azuela de la Cueva, \textit{Arte y poder: renacimiento artístico y revolución social México, 1910-1945} (Zamora, Michoacán: El Colegio de Michoacán, 2005).

\textsuperscript{417} Roger Bartra, \textit{La jaula de la melancolía: identidad y metamorfosis del mexicano}. (México: Grijalbo, 1987).
If a peasant wanted to overcome such conditions, he or she could rely on another of the major gains of the Revolution: free education under the Vasconcelist project. Within this classical model of Mexican nationalism, the “educated” and “cultivated” people from the city would flock to rural areas to implement literacy campaigns with the goal of educating illiterate and ignorant rural people. The message was not very different than the nineteenth century liberal model, with integration and cultural assimilation touted as the key for both personal and national success.

**Revistas Musicales: Political and Social Criticism**

In revistas musicales, musical numbers were often meant as a political commentary on unpopular or questionable measures, especially those that affected the traditional customs of common people. Many of these customs concerned people’s choices for leisure time; comedians often satirized the official solutions. As shown in Chapter One, the government legally characterized the carpas as “containment houses” and authorized them in the hopes they would keep people away from the pulquería which functionaries considered centers of vice. These two social concerns converge in the “revista Mexicana-cómico-lírica fantástica” *Manicomio de Cuerdos*, a revista musical that relies on the representation of pulque drinkers and, while ridiculing them, criticizes the official measures against them.

*Manicomio de Cuerdos* (“Madhouse of the Sane”)

The words were written by Eduardo Macedo y Arbeu, with music by Gustavo Campa and Luis Arcaraz, a Spanish impresario settled in Mexico City. It was first performed in the Teatro

---

Guerrero in Puebla in August 1890, and a month later in the Teatro Arbeu in Mexico City.\textsuperscript{419} One contemporary critic noted that, “The music was cheerful, with very Mexican pieces such as ‘El tulipán’ and ‘Las golondrinas.’”\textsuperscript{420}

Years after the premier night, theater critic and historian Armando de María y Campos kept a record of Manicomio de Cuerdos. In absence of the script, his account is what has been left to the archive. Praising one number titled “The Skaters,” de María y Campos wrote:

The vulgar designation “skaters” referred to the group of common men [hombres del pueblo] habitual drunks, who came out to clean the city daily. The choir members came out with brooms, shovels and hoses to make the act more caricaturesque, with everything in this number comprising a impotent criticism of how the government mistreated the people, the ‘plebe’ as it was then called.\textsuperscript{421}

This number is a retrospective critique of military “forced impressment,” an official and widely unpopular measure locally known as “leva de vagos.” Since the colonial times, the infamous measure sought to counteract a historically low army enrollment rate.\textsuperscript{422} The measure was an authoritarian “solution” to increase the number of men in the army by “recruiting” – basically a euphemism for kidnapping – people who could not demonstrate to have what authorities considered an acceptable form of employment, and who were thus found “guilty” of vagrancy.\textsuperscript{423}

\textsuperscript{419} For information about the performance of this revista see Luis Reyes de la Maza, Vol. II, 20.

\textsuperscript{420} Idem, 21.

\textsuperscript{421} “Se designaba vulgarmente con el nombre de “patinadores” al grupo de hombres del pueblo compuesto por ebrios consuetudinarios que salía diariamente a hacer el aseo de la ciudad […] Los coristas salían con escobas, palas, regaderas, etc., para hacer más caricaturesco el numero y todo en él encierra una impotente crítica a la forma en que el gobierno trataba al pueblo, a la “plebe” como se le denominaba entonces.” Armando de María y Campos, \textit{El teatro del género chico en la Revolución mexicana} (México D.F.: 1956), 30.

\textsuperscript{422} An extensive body of work concerning the urban poor and its relationship with the “Leva de vagos” has been published in Mexico and the USA over the past couple of decades. For a few examples of this see Sonia Pérez Toledo, “Los vagos de la ciudad de México y el tribunal de vagos en la primera mitad del siglo XIX,” in \textit{Secuencia 27}, (September-December, 1993): 27- 42 ; José Antonio Serrano Ortega “Levas, tribunal de vagos y Ayuntamiento: la Ciudad de México 1825-1836,” in \textit{Ciudad de México: instituciones, actores sociales y conflicto político, 1774-1931} (México: Colegio de Michoacán/UAM, 1990); Silvia Marina Arrom, \textit{Containing the Poor: the Mexico City Poor House, 1774-1871} (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Richard A. Warren, \textit{Vagrants and Citizens: Politics and the Masques in Mexico City from Colony to Republic} (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 2001).

\textsuperscript{423} In fact, similar measures had been applied in other Latin American countries at the end of the colonial period with a certain degree of opposition from liberal politicians. As historian Olga Gonzalez-Silen has argued for the case of
In Mexico, the law described “vagos,” “malentretenidos,” and “viciosos” as “all those individuals who, lacking an honest occupation for their subsistence, or who knowing a profession, did not exercise it and therefore spent their time in gambling houses, pulquerías, pool houses and other centers of entertainment.” Due to the difficulty of demonstrating vagrancy, the authorities often arrested drunk people in the streets or in bars, pulquerías and similar leisure spaces. The perception that people who attended these places were “vagrants” was coeval with changing views of work and “social productivity,” both of which had been a salient concern in the official discourse since late colonial times. Their drunkenness made it difficult for many of these men to demonstrate that they were indeed people with employments and professions. Therefore, the detention of individuals and their identification as “vagrants” depended to a great extent on the police’s judgment, which was often clouded by racial prejudice and by what they read as visual indicators of “poverty.” Furthermore, officers determined that cultural practices such as selling food, produce and handcrafts, playing an instrument, and performing comedy – all activities done in the streets – were incompatible with new notions of productivity and with the official discourse of a civilized (Europeanized) behavior. Ironically, despite the fact that these same activities were taking place in European cities too, officers believed that these street activities gave Mexico City an undesirable image.

Venezuela, the political implications of the leva de vagos, played a decisive role in paving the way to the establishment of the Junta de Caracas in 1810, which led in turn to the start of the Independence movement throughout the continent. See Olga Gonzalez-Silen, “Unexpected Oppositions: Independence and the 1809 Leva de Vagos in the Province of Caracas,” in The Americas (88:3, 2012): 347-375.

“Todos aquellos individuos quienes, careciendo de una ocupación para su subsistencia, o quienes sabiendo una profesión, no la ejerzan y en su lugar pasen el tiempo en casas de apuestas, pulquerías, billares y otros centro de diversiones.” AHDF–Vagos, Vol. 4151, File 4.

The musical number “The Skaters” criticized the detention of vagrants. The song links the consumption of pulque to a marginal group referred to in the lyrics as “the poor.” Presumably, trying to be truthful to what he heard at the theater, De María y Campos’ draws attention to the flawed linguistic performance of the “skaters” by distorting and misspelling words in his transcription. This number, therefore, also contributed to elaborating a sociolinguistic stereotype of the popular subject.

The transcription reads:

**Patinadores:**
- Semos probes ciudadanos,
- Que lempiamos la suidá;
- Solamen…te por ser probes,
- Nos obligan a limpiar
- ¡Ay!, ¡ay!, ¡ay!,
- Que así cuesta más barato
- Al señor municipal.
- ¡Dialtiro la tronchan verde
- No la dejan madurar!

(Un corista ofrece pulque al gendarme y éste lo bebe después de reírse un instante)
- Nos llaman patinadores
- Y es porque al escurecer,
- Con el neutle hacemos eses
- Y hasta hablamos en fransés;
- Porque todo lo de ajuera
- Siempre muy bien visto es.
- ¡Ay de la…tristeza, vales,
pulquería hasta después!

**Gendarmes:**
- //A barrer a limpiar,
- Y después regar/

**Choir:**
(Avanzando hacia el proscenio)
- Los tecolotes soplones tulitulipán
- A tracción nos peparon
- Y a la carsel nos llevaron
- Por estar muy alegrones
- Con el tulitulipán,
- Juimos a la pulquería, seca del anocheser
- Vimos el a…maneser
- En una comisaría
- ¡Ay, ay, Ay!
- Vales,¡hay que resinarose,
- qui otra cosa se ha di hacer
- sin hechar una medida
- hoy nos llevan a Belén
- Cuando salga de la Chinche,
- Un sorbete comprará
- Y hecho todo un diputado,
- Por las calles pasiar;

**Skaters:**
- We are poor citizens
- Cleaning the city
- Only because we are poor,
- They force us to clean
- Ow! Ow! Ow!
- This costs less
- for the municipal president
- They cut it green still
- and do not let it ripen!

(A chorister offers pulque to a gendarme who drinks it after laughing for a second)
- We are called the skaters
- The reason is that when it gets dark
- We drink pulque to defecate
- And even talk in French
- Because everything foreign
- is always very welcome.
- Oh, what a pity
- The pulquería until later!

**Gendarmes:**
- //To sweep, to clean,
- And then to water [the plants]//

(Walking to the front of the stage)
- The snitch owls tulitulipán
- They betrayed us and picked us up [from the Streets], and took us to jail
- Because we were too happy
- With the tulitulipán
- To the pulquería we went
- At the fall of the day
- But we saw the d…awn of the day
- At the police office
- Ow, ow, ow!!
- But all right pals, we should cope with it
- What else could we do?
- Without even asking
- They take us to [the jail of] Belen
- When I get out of jail
- I will buy a sorbet
- And converted into a congressman
- I will stroll the streets

257
De María y Campos’ use of elision marks suggests that, in the context of performance, the actors would have mimicked hiccups as they sang, to emphasize that they not only conceived of the characters as poor but as drunk as well.

These performatic elements suggest that suspected vagrants were arrested when most vulnerable, and that they were stigmatized as drunks. Meanwhile the song works as a mockery of those urban subjects who tried to integrate to mainstream urban culture, but failed in the attempt. In other words, it marks them as payos or pelados. While the speech of the characters hints at the intersections between class and ethnicity, such associations were never explicitly stated in De María y Campos’ transcription. However, additional performatic elements such as costuming and certain stereotypical bodily features and gestures may have helped to clarify the social and ethnic standing of these characters for the audience. The deeply ingrained roots of this theatrical convention would have ensured that most viewers understood such associations. Reyes de la Maza: reports: “Manicomio de cuerdos was the biggest box-office hit for the company at the Arbeu. It remained on the billboard for many weeks and the audience could not get enough laughs out of the ‘peladitos’ talking outside of the pulquería.”

The musical number “The skaters” from Manicomio de Cuerdos shows a witty social commentary on authorities and on the ideology they advocated. The remark that after drinking “neutle” [pulque] “we speak in French because foreign/ is always very welcome.” mocks the

---

426 Transcription taken from De María y Campos, Teatro de género chico, 30.

427 Reyes de la Maza, Vol. II, 21. “Manicomio de cuerdos fue el mayor triunfo económico para la compañía de zarzuela del Arbeu. Semanas enteras permaneció en cartelera y el público no se cansaba de reír con los “peladitos” dialogando fuera de la pulquería.”

258
European aspirations of the municipal authorities. The comment that “they are forced to clean the city because that way is cheaper for the ‘síñor municipal’ (the mayor)” also served a retaliatory function. The popularity of this song strongly suggests the audience’s sympathy for those “wasted” men who contested the municipal order by deriding the government’s cultural aspirations.

Many similar critiques articulated through comedy in several other revistas musicales prevailed and even became stronger as the political tensions increased towards the end of the Porfirian regime (1900-1910). Written by José F. Elizondo, El país de la metralla premiered in the Teatro Lírico of México City in May 10th, 1913. The musical number “La Crisis” – fifth in this revista– is another example of blatant criticism to the cultural and economic aspirations of the elites during the late Porfiriato. Openly mocking the infatuation of the Porfirian elites with all things French, this number presents mademoiselle Crisis, singing about the disgraces that her seductive style has caused to those who followed her. Her affected French accent, as indicated in this transcription, sure made people laugh.

Je suis mademoiselle Crisis, I am mademoiselle Crisis
Que viene a reinag I come to reign
En este país. In this country
Como en la tiega toda, As in the entire earth
Soy una mujeg de moda, I a m a fashionable woman
A México he venido To Mexico I have come
A haceg mucho güido. To make a lot of noise
Los pueblos que me siguen The people that follow me
Plata no consiguen Money do not get
Y todos se enamogan And all they fall in love
Si sueno así. If I sound like this

Gerardo Luzuriaga has provided a thorough analysis of the revista El país de la metralla and its political implications. May these two examples suffice to illustrate some of the ways in which either the social anxieties or the cultural pretensions (of the late Porfirian elites were derided by revista writers and actors.
During the first decade of the twentieth century, the authorities underestimated the provocative effects of these comic acts, which masked their social and political criticism with innocence and lightness. Such impression of innocence and lightness was largely given by the simplicity of the music. The constant repetition of melodic lines as a result of the simple ABAB structure, often merited these songs the fame of banal. This disregard however, shifted during the years leading to the Revolution. Comedy’s supposed triviality was perhaps never more questioned than during the harshest years of the Revolution, which includes the Ten Tragic Days and the years under General Victoriano Huerta (1910-1914). Given their own lack of political legitimacy, politicians came to fear comedians’ fame and social influence. Some newly appointed governors, for example, persecuted specific authors and actors who were critical of particular politicians.

Leonardo Beristáin “El Cuatezón,” is a case in point. Beristáin was one of the first carpa comedians to attain fame through political criticism. Before joining Mexico City’s theaters, he was well known for his characterizations of popular types in regional theaters. His popularity among the audiences of theaters and carpas, as well as his closeness with other colleagues as suggested by his frequent participation in benefit shows, may explain his nickname “Cuatezón,” which translates as “big friend.” According to some contemporaries, Beristáin was a protégée of General Huerta, and thus parodied the general’s political enemies without fear of persecution. When the General resigned and Venustiano Carranza became the new president, Beristáin had to escape to Cuba, a popular destination for subversive actors at the time; he did not return to Mexico until 1918. Although upon his return a climate of greater tolerance allowed for more political criticism, Beristáin concentrated thereafter on comic and social criticism rather than on political satire.

428 Beristáin was one of the earliest figures to perform in the film industry, with the silent film Viage Redondo (1919) in which he played the part of a Mexican charro. Morales, Cómicos de México, 42.

429 “Cuate” is a colloquial word for “amigo” (friend), while “cuatezón” (big friend) adds even more familiarity.

430 Morales, Cómicos de México, 56.
Another actor who practiced political criticism was Roberto Soto, nicknamed “El Panzón [big belly] Soto.” He rose to fame in the 1910s and, in the eyes of apprehensive politicians, became one of the most feared performers. Later, his wife, actress Delia Magaña, would recall: “I think that the one who truly spoke out loud and clear was Roberto Soto […] [He] criticized the government, not only the president or state governors and congressmen, but also Morones (the chairman of the Worker’s Union). There were plans to kill him.” While in her recollection she disregards Soto’s antecedents, Magaña’s account attests to her fear for Soto’s fate in such an explosive political atmosphere.

In the 1920s, and despite the authorities’ anxieties, political satire was well established in the arena of entertainment, enjoying public recognition as well as relative tolerance. The populist politicians of the post-Revolution decided not to silence their blistering criticism, in favor of gaining the sympathy of the electorate. During this decade, besides Beristáin and Soto, actresses like Lupe Rivas Cacho “La Pingüica” and Amelia Wilhelmy were among the most successful comedians, performing in the capital city in both carpas and established theaters.

Comedy Sketches: From Circus Clown to Stock Character

Carpa shows included brief spoken sketches that alternated with short musical numbers. Many of the comic techniques used in the carpas were inspired in the tradition of clowns from European – especially English and Polish – circus companies that arrived in Mexico in the nineteenth century. Working at the famous circus Orrin, which arrived in Mexico City in 1883, the

431 “Creo que el que verdaderamente inició y lanzó el grito de crítica fue Roberto Soto; […] Se criticaba al gobierno, no solamente al presidente, a los gobernadores, a los diputados, sino también a Morones (jefe de los sindicatos de trabajadores). Algunas veces tuvieron intenciones de matarlo.” Delia Magaña quoted in Merlín, Vida y milagros, 120.

432 For a historical narrative of the arrival of European circus companies in Mexico and the development of Mexican circus see Julio Revolledo Cárdenas, La fabulosa historia del circo en México (México, D.F.: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes; Escenología, 2004).
star clown Ricardo Bell (1858-1911) – locally known as “El Payaso Bell” – blazed the way for a legion of comedians that performed in both revista theaters and carpas. Born in Deptford, England, Richard Bell arrived in Mexico in 1867, with the circus Chinelli. The many years he spent in Mexico made him adopt the country as a second homeland. His characters reproduced and even expanded upon pre-established conventions of representation of the popular subject.

The musical and comedy numbers performed in circuses offer a clear example of the trajectory and dispersal of the music and theatrical techniques that nourished the carpas. Not without some mythical tinges, the theater scholar Antonio Magaña elaborates on the relevance of the circus in the development of the carpas and its links with the fragile economic context of the Revolution. He does not hesitate to highlight the role played by clowns in the development of vernacular forms of musical comedy, claiming that:

In the late nineteenth century, the Orrín brothers presented in their famous circus, among other pieces, the pantomime “La Acuática” as a complementary and innovative show, from which were derived, years later, other representations with theatrical tendencies that were later imitated by modest circuses in public squares. As time went by, each public square circus became a carpa theater, pointing to a decidedly theatrical inclination. Displaced from the prestigious first class theaters, actors sought in the carpas an appropriate place to continue in the variety shows, and the clowns, heroic pillars of the circus, introduced in their turn the recitation of sentimental poetry and lyric monologues. This is how this form of popular theater was spontaneously born, precisely in the first years of the Revolution.433

Due to his close friendship with President Porfirio Díaz, Ricardo Bell stands as one of the most famous and documented figures of the Orrín Circus. The frequent visits of Díaz to the Orrín Circus, located adjacent to the splendid gardens of the Alameda, made this venue one of the most prestigious centers of entertainment at the time. This was one of the venues where the elites went to

find some amusement, as well as to be seen by others, just like in the opera. The 1889 lithograph below may assist us in imagining the size of this circus and the grandiosity of its shows (Fig. 4.6).\footnote{For more information on the social significance of the Orrín circus see Julio Revolledo Cárdenas, Op. cit; and Ricardo Pérez Montfort, “Circo, teatro y variedades,” 79-114.}

**Fig. 4.6.** “Lithograph of Circus Orrín” (1889)

![Lithograph of Circus Orrín](image1)

**Fig. 4.7.** “Inside the Circus Orrín, published in *El mundo ilustrado* 1903”

![Inside the Circus Orrín](image2)
As second photograph from 1903 captures the social ambiance inside the Orrin Circus. In the frontline, the artillery band provided the music for the shows. The musical repertory that initially accompanied comedy in this circus was chiefly that of European military bands, which had become popular in public life during the French occupation in Mexico (1862-1867). These ensembles also performed and recorded a number of musical genres including minuets, funeral marches, danzones, waltzes, corridos, pasos dobles, polkas, rancheras, alabanzas and “foxes” (foxtrots). The demands and responses of highly interactive audiences may have gradually motivated circus shows to cater to local taste, with the routines of clowns and jugglers soon incorporating some local genres. As a result, sainetes, décimas, jarabes and other short Mexican musical forms accompanied with one or more guitars became the norm. Figures like Bell himself performed them in their routines. Magaña’s indication of clowns performing “lyric monologues,” most likely refers to these musical genres. The participation of clowns contributed to developing a sort of circus folklore that, while incorporating performatic elements of its own, also helped crystallize social representations of iconic popular figures.\footnote{Evidently this also happened in other cities of Latin America where the circus was an important form of entertainment. Some scholars maintain that the circus was of paramount importance for the development of vernacular music genres. See for example, Beatriz Seibel, \textit{El teatro “bárbaro” del interior} (Buenos Aires, Argentina: Ediciones de la Pluma, 1985); Héctor Castagnino, \textit{Centurias del circo criollo} (Buenos Aires: Editorial Perrot, 1959); and Pilar Ducci González, \textit{Años de circo: historia de la actividad circense en Chile} (Barcelona, Spain: Circus Arts Foundation, 2012).}

\textit{Un Circo de Barrio (“A Barrio Circus”)}

Ricardo Bell originally performed the number \textit{Un Circo de Barrio}, but no records remain of his rendition. Years later, the duo Rosales and Robinson, some of the first musicians to be recorded by Victor Records, recorded this piece.\footnote{Available through the UCLA proxy Server at the Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican American Music \url{http://frontera.library.ucla.edu/find.do?keyword=un+circo+de+barrio}} This duo was known to have performed in both the Orrin circus and in carpa theaters. Recorded in 1908, only two years before the Revolution, this recording
thus serves as an evidence of the circulation of repertory between different scenes of public entertainment. Additionally, this musical sketch attests to some of the social tensions that sprung up shortly before the start of the armed conflict.

In *Un circo de barrio*, the dialogue criticizes the nineteenth-century Mexican bourgeoisie. (See transcription in Appendix 13). The characters are a *catrín* – a sort of elegantly dressed seducer and who pretends to be a man of means – and Rodimini, an opinionated and mordant clown who, identifying with “el pueblo” also speaks in the interest of the single ladies in the audience.” Rodimini derides the moral conduct of the *catrín* and dissuades the ladies from falling for his feigned charms. Rodimini denounces this seducer for not working, but still putting on the airs of a wealthy man. Secure in the comic nature of his clown character, the performer (be it Ricardo Bell or either Rosales or Robinson scorned the *catrín*’s image and behavior, thus inverting the positions of power.

Furthermore, the fact that the title of this piece refers to not a grandiose circus like the Orrín itself, but to a “circo de barrio” serves as a wonderful double-edged performativ strategy. While criticizing the bourgeoisie for their undeserved wealth, the clown simultaneously opens up the possibility that the *catrín* is not an actual member of the elites, but a “fake” one from one of the poor *barrios* in Mexico City. This maneuver made a witty social commentary acceptable to the audiences of the Orrín circus. Rosales and Robinson performed at both the Orrín circus and at carpas theaters. Therefore, while the criticism of the bourgeoisie had to be made palatable to the audience at the big, official circus, the same act would have gone over with no problem in the carpas.

Music played by the military band frames the scene. It starts with a brief instrumental overture in duple meter. The fast pace of the initial melody and its lack of melodic development makes it suitable for accompanying fast body movement, perhaps the moment when the character

---

437 Information taken from LP album and booklet *Abrego y Picazo/ Rosales y Robinson, Música del 900*. Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos. (AMEF- T-221-44).
of Rodimini appears on stage, probably mocking the *catrín*. The second melodic motive serves as a sung vignette mediating between Rodimini’s spoken verses, organized in décimas.

The décima, a ten-line octosyllabic verse, was one of the most popular poetic forms in Spain. This verse is also called “décima espinela, after its creator the guitarist and poet Vicente Espinal. While in Spain, the pinnacle of the décima happened in the Golden Age, in Latin America these verses became part of vernacular folklore having a very strong presence in traditional cultures even today. This strophe is present in songs, serenades, lullabies, traditional music and, most visibly in competitions where “decimistas,” or décima reciters, challenge one another into improvising the verses. The subject matter of décimas is varied, and, when improvised, the decimista satirizes, criticizes or simply tells the events of the local community.\textsuperscript{438} The Canary Islands was another place outside of continental Spain where the décima also became part of the local folklore.\textsuperscript{439} In México, this genre became ingrained in the musical cultures of central Mexico, especially of regions such as Querétaro and Hidalgo.

Typically in a décima espinela, all the rhymes are consonant, (verses coincide phonetically from the stressed vowel) and are organized in a pattern abba accddc. There is a pause between the fourth and fifth verse.\textsuperscript{440} The music that accompanies the décima varies depending on the vernacular genres of each country. The instrumentation can consist of guitars, lutes, violins, harps, or percussion instruments such as marimbas and other idiophones.

The music accompaniment in “*Un circo de barrio*” consists of a simple melodic design of a descending motive in duple meter, repetitive short periods of four bars with no development, and


only a conclusive gesture to the tonic at the end of the second period. Clearly, the reduced melodic mobility of this vignette reproduces the semantic content of the word “quietecito,” whose use of the diminutive form conveys a colloquial twist that can be translated as “still as a mouse.”

**Fig. 4.8. Melody Transcription: “Quietecito” from *Un circo de barrio***

The enjambment in the tenth verse works simultaneously as a break of the syntactic unit and as the cue to the military band to introduce the melodic vignette. Because the word “quietecito” does not fit into the rhyming structure, it works structurally as the pause between each décima. Therefore, it also activates a semantic game and toys with ambiguity, acquiring different semantic context in each new décima. Besides rhythmicizing Rodimini’s monologue, the décima would also have functioned as a mark of the “popular.”

As part of their entertainment numbers, the carpas often presented comedic pieces in one act that served as an intermezzo between the music varieties. Common among other circus traditions in Latin America, these brief comic monologues were often musicalized with vernacular music genres, which resulted in a tradition called *paya*, with *payadores* being the vocalists who improvised the recitations. Pedro Granados first recognized the importance of versifying clowns in the development of carpas shows. Tracing a line of genealogy, he opposed the “European clown” to the one he termed the “entirely Mexica clown.” This term alludes to the ideology of mestizaje, reflecting the nationalist narrative in which his report participates. Granados explained:

*After the Revolution, the European circus man, who used to live under the tent, comes up with the idea of making small and portable theaters, which is to say, the carpas. In them, they perform...*
pantomine, dances, songs, acrobatics, but first and foremost, the ‘clown’ was and has always been the central figure of the show. […] The European finds that this is very striking and then, for the first time, calls for the entirely ‘Mexica’ clown’ to come to the stage and express everything artistic he has in his blood and heart.441

The local press closely followed the life of Ricardo Bell and his dedication to the circus. The announcement of his death in 1911 generated many public condolences and appreciative accounts of his life that adopted him as a Mexican citizen honoris causa.442 Bell’s death also kindled a wave of nostalgia for the heyday of the Orrin Circus, which was also nostalgia for the affluence and stability of Porfirian years. The angst caused by the Revolution could hardly be compared with the sense of cultural confidence reigning in the late Porfirism. In an analogous way, the humility of the carpas and the cynicism and nonchalance of the revista theaters were far from the former splendor and social respectability of the Orrin circus. In the 1920s, theater critics lamented the displacement of what they saw as the “typical” circus clown by revista comedians, revealing their melancholy for those bygone days. Roberto Soto was a frequent object of comparisons between the old and the new traditions of comedy. Journalist Arturo Rigel complained that:

Clowns have changed a lot from Ricardo Bell to nowadays… Better said, the ‘typical’ clown does not exist any longer. At nights, when in the solitary alley there is not even a straggler night-bird, one can go to the first ‘rataplán’ theater and Roberto Soto, the last ‘clown’ in the city, entertains a frivolous audience, gesticulates with difficulty, makes outstanding efforts to get some Homeric laughs, even when his spirit and talent are made to interpret subtle characters from select works… Roberto Soto is a great actor who has temporarily found refuge in the genre that is closer to that of the characters of the roads and the barriadas. God willing, life will take his hand and put him on his right, true track.443

441 “pasa el tiempo de la Revolución [1910-1920], y el circense europeo acostumbrado a vivir bajo la lona, idea hacer teatritos de lona portátiles, o sea, las carpas. En ellas hacen pantomimas, bailables, canciones, saltos, maromas, pero ante todo el “payaso” siempre fue y ha sido el personaje central del espectáculo […] el Europeo ve que aquello llama mucho la atención y entonces llama por primera vez al netamente “mexica,” a que suba al tablado a expresar todo lo que trae de artista en su sangre y su corazón.” Granados, Carpas de México, 53.

442 For a brief account of Bell’s life published upon his death see, “Muerte de Ricardo Bell, el payaso consentido de México,” Revista de Revistas, (19 de Marzo, 1911): 19.

443 “Mucho han cambiado los payasos desde Ricardo Bell hasta nuestros días… Para mejor decir, el payaso "típico" ya no existe. En las noches, cuando en la calleja solitaria no queda un trasnochador rezagado, nos metemos en el primer teatro de "rataplán" y Roberto Soto, el último "clown" de la ciudad, entretiene a una concurrencia frívola, gesticula con trabajo, hace esfuerzos inauditos por arrancar las carcajadas homéricas, aún cuando su espíritu y su talento están hechos para interpretar sutiles personajes de obras selectas …Roberto Soto es un gran actor que se ha refugiado pasajeramente en el género que más se parece al de los personajes de los caminos y de las barriadas. Dios quiera que la vida le lleve de la mano.
Rigel’s full article entails a clear paradox. On the one hand, he gives Bell an implicit compliment for elevating comedy to an important position within the performing arts. On the other, in this quote he laments that Soto, a notably talented actor, has found refuge in this frivolous genre instead of opting for the dramatic art, allegedly more suitable to his aptitude and “true spirit.” For Rigel, the problem was not the comic genre Soto performed, but the places where he performed it: the barriadas. Rigel’s association with the characters he considered typical of the theaters – that is, characters of “the roads and the barriadas” – helps to reinforce perceptions of the carpas and their actors as being “impoverished” and dejected. He further suggested that:

There is a sorrowful side to those men who go from city to city making old people laugh and children cry. The dusty aspect of the carpa comedians “Cara sucia,” [Dirty face] “Totito,” [and] “Toñito” are dolls from the farmland, sad ghosts of Ricardo Bell, clowns who chew their bread moistened in tears. Their obligation is to make people laugh at all costs.444

The carpas’ physical unpretentiousness indeed contrasted remarkably with the pomposity of the circus Orrín (see Fig 4.9). And yet, Rigel’s condescending descriptions of these clowns’ “afflicted aspect” were written before the actual influence of carpa comedians could be more accurately assessed. As it turned out, the influence of revista and carpa comedians, their “obligation to make people laugh,” turned out to be more crucial to prompting social transformations than Rigel’s critique suggested. After all, that is the reason why influential politicians persecuted, and even punished, many of these actors.


444 “Hay otro aspecto doliente en esos hombres que van de ciudad a ciudad haciendo reír a los ancianos y llorar a los pequeños. El aspecto polvoso de los cómicos de carpa “Cara sucia,” “Totito,” “Toñito,” son muñecos de la gleba, tristes fantasmas de Ricardo Bell, payasos que mastican el pan lleno de lágrimas. Su obligación es hacer reír a toda costa.” Idem.
Circulation of Actors Between Revista Theaters and Carpas

The public acclaim of revista comedy during the 1910s made it impossible for managers of formal theaters to satisfy the demand for these spectacles. This resulted in an increased schedule for carpa companies, which offered the “frivolous” entertainment in growing numbers. For many performers, the training they obtained at the carpas eventually granted them access to the revista circuit. As Morales chronicled, Roberto Soto, who was also a theater impresario and a talent-chaser at the carpas, recruited several other carpas actors and actresses to enrich the herds of political comedy actors in formal revista theaters. According to some newspaper articles, he first saw Amelia Wilhelmy in one of these humble portable theaters before hiring her to perform in the established revista theaters. Similarly, Leopoldo Beristáin performed with his own itinerant carpa company from the 1890s, and the sisters Elisa and Antonia Berumen acted in benefit show held in carpas in the year 1921. These examples confirms Morales’ claim that the itinerant theaters were an “acting nursery” for mainstream entertainment from the beginning of the twentieth century.

445 “La Estrella que Roberto Soto arrancó de las carpas de barriada” in El Universal Ilustrado, (February 16, 1928), referred in Morales, Cómicos de México, 106.
The expressions of solidarity manifested in the benefit shows reinforce the idea that relationships between the two circuits of entertainment were close. This closeness contends views held some years ago by some Latin American popular music historians, that popular culture, and specifically this form of marginal theater, was a by-product of more “legitimate” forms of artistic expression, that emulated its forms and techniques. Such appraisals of popular culture as an exclusively top-down cultural phenomenon obscure the ways in which the disenfranchised people have managed to contest major political projects, and have an influence on the upper classes.

To argue that the carpas were the original source of inspiration for what went on in the revista theaters would entail a similar tendentiousness. Since these two circuits were so closely intertwined, the influences likely flowed in both directions. As I see it, both revista theaters and carpa shows were sites of political and social contestation. Through comedy, music and lyric fantasy, these circuits helped people in the city to cope with intense socio-political changes. As Carlos Monsiváis noticed too, the género chico and the revista theater desacralized the patriotic fervor with which the Revolutionary politicians presented their projects. He maintained that:

Nothing, to use a more precise term, secularizes the Revolution more than the género chico and the carpas shows, with their flour-powdered comedians, their gachupines [Spaniards] in taverns, their peladitos, their lagartijos [Casanovas], their comedians playing drunken women at a pulquería, their Indians from Xochimilco, their gendarmes with aguamielero moustaches [he who sips the maguey's sap, the basic substance that turns into pulque] their payos amazed at he possibility of buying the Cathedral, their beatas [sanctimonious lay sisters] who crossed themselves before the imminence of the coitus that excludes them, their revolutionaries dazzled by the unfamiliar smell of gun powder.

446 In the first half of the twentieth century, the influential Argentinean musicologist Carlos Vega defended the idea that popular culture was derived from the cultural expressions of the higher classes, thus supporting a “top-down” model for the development of popular music. See Carlos Vega, Panorama de la Música Popular Argentina (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1944). Meanwhile Juan Pablo González and Claudio Rolle claim that itinerant shows like circus and other travelling spectacles in Chile contributed to bring together the elites and the “emergent sectors,” because the latter imitated what was performed in the formal circuits. See Juan Pablo González Rodríguez and Claudio Rolle, Historia social de la música popular en Chile, 1890-1950 (Santiago, Chile: Ediciones Universidad Católica de Chile, 2005), 292.

447 Such tendentiousness certainly occurred years later mostly due to political reasons, and after the carpas had been appropriated by the mainstream entertainment industry. I deal with this historiographic problem in chapter five.

448 “Nada, para usar un término más preciso, seculariza más a la Revolución que el teatro de género chico y la carpa con sus cómicos enharinados, sus gachupines tabernarios, sus peladitos, sus lagartijos, su cómicos que interpretan borrachitas de pulquería, sus indios de Xochimilco, sus gendarmes de bigotes aguamieleros, sus payos atónitos ante la posibilidad de
Revista and carpa comedians crafted comedy acts whose characters derided the values of the Mexican bourgeoisie. A case in point is Leonardo Beristáin, whose rendition of a local Don Juan in the revista *El terrible Don Juan*, endowed this character with great cynicism and disregard for social norms. The vulgarity that Samper attributed to these kind of shows, are partially credited to comic allusions to lower-body functions such as the ones deployed in this piece. Moreover, pranks infused with sexual innuendos and double entendre accompanied by satirical gestures were all hallmarks of Beristáin’s rascal characters.

*El Terrible Don Juan* premiered in March 1911, and the surviving libretto does not indicate the name of its author. The story draws from the Spanish literary tradition of the quintessential libertine, Don Juan. Beristáin’s Don Juan, seemingly an irresponsible scrounger, is courting Doña Flora, a flower seller who also happens to be his landlord’s daughter. Don Juan’s plan to charm Flora serves his ultimate purpose: to avoid paying the fourteen months of rent he owes. Preparing to meet the lady, Don Juan reveals to the audience that he is wearing his classy silk underwear reserved for special occasions. The ellipses indicated by theater historian Miguel Ángel Morales in his transcription indicate the performative pauses that allowed people in the audience to complete the meaning with sexual innuendos. Don Juan promises that:

Doña Flora se vendrá a desvanecer en mis brazos. [...] esta indumentaria solo me la pongo cuando se trata de ... de ...coger a una mujer... por la mano y decirle cuatro píropos y conseguir de ella una noche de amor.

(Pide una copa de cognac)

 [...] pues el licor enardece los nervios y desata la lengua, aunque es verdad que comprar la catedral, sus beatas que se persignan ante la inminencia del coito que las excluye, sus revolucionarios sorprendidos ante ese olor desconocido, el de la pólvora." Monsiváis (2000), 155.

[^449]: Transcription taken from Morales, *Cómicos de México*, 51.
cuando abuso de este líquido ya no se me para… un amigo adelante sin que no le diga una majadería.\textsuperscript{450}

with my friends, without me cursing. [lit., “a friend doesn’t pass in front of me without me saying something crude to him”]

When Don Juan is about to take out his wallet to pay Doña Flora for a flower from her bouquet, the two have the following conversation:

Doña Flora: Permíteme que le de el gusto de sacársela yo misma
Don Juan: ¿Qué usted me la saque?
Doña Flora: ¿Le disgusta?
Don Juan: No tal, puede usted sacarme lo que quiera.\textsuperscript{451}

Doña Flora: Let me be pleased to take it out myself.
Don Juan: Do you want to take it out for me?
Donña Flora: Don’t you like it?
Don Juan: Oh no! You can take out whatever you want.

Doña Flora is aware of Don Juan’s designs upon her. To foil Juan’s plans, Doña Flora asks his friends to add a laxative to his cognac. He begins to feel the effects during his amorous “confession.” He proclaims:

Don Juan: Florita, […] estoy locamente enamorado de usted
Doña Flora: De veras? Acaso ignora usted que soy una mujer honrada?
DJ: No lo ignoro, pero el amor no hace reparos. Además ...(Siente una punzada, efecto del purgante. Hace una mueca y se aprieta el estómago)
DF: ¿Le sucede a usted algo?
DJ: No, no es nada, además, le prometo ser enteramente discreto. Crea que jamás nunca sentí amor tan grande como el que por usted siento. El amor… (Siente otra punzada (Aparte) ¡Cielos, que dolorcillo siento en la barriga).
DF: Ya comienzan los efectos.
DJ: El amor es lo sublime, yo le prometo adorarla eternamente, usted será la que mande y yo el que obedezca. Seré… (Siente otra punzada más fuerte, de la que se queja. Hace contorsiones y se aprieta la barriga) ¿Qué es lo que me pasa? ¡Yo desfallezco!
DF: ¿Se siente usted malo? (Sonrie)
DJ: No, no me siento malo (Aparte) Lo que siento son ganas de … ¡ay! Siento un embarazo horrible.

DJ: Florita, […] I am madly in love with you.
DF: Really? Do you not know that I am an honorable woman?
DJ: I know it, but love does not make distinctions. Besides… (He feels an intense pain caused by the laxative. He makes a face and presses his stomach)
DF: Is something wrong with you?
DJ: It is nothing. Besides, I promise I will be absolutely discreet. Please believe me when I say that I have never felt this way before. Love… (He feels a stabbing pain once more) (Talking to the side) My God! What is this pain in my tummy?
DF: It is beginning to work.
DJ: Love is sublime. I promise that I will love you eternally. You will order and I will obey. I will be… (He feels another sharp pain and he complains. He contorts and holds his tummy) What is the matter with me? I am dying.
DF: Are you sick? (She smiles)
DJ: No, I am not sick. (aside) What I feel is a desire to… Oh my . . . I feel terribly ashamed.

\textsuperscript{450} Idem.

\textsuperscript{451} Idem, 52.
Don Juan pretexta que le llaman para ir al baño. Regresa con dolor en el trasero. Ansía retornar al baño pero lo intercepta Ratero, supuesto marido de doña Flora. Para lavar su honor manchado, reta a duelo a Don Juan

Don Juan excuses himself and goes to the restroom. He returns with pain in his butt. He pledges to go back to the restroom but is intercepted by Ratero, Flora’s supposed husband. To avenge his tarnished honor, he challenges Don Juan to a duel.

R: ¿Acepta?, inquiere el Ratero
Don Juan: Pues bien, acepto, pero déjeme por su madre, que me...!Ay! por fin sucedió. Adiós trajecito de seda con corazones rojos.
(se dirige al baño)452

R: Do you accept?
DJ: All right, I accept, but let me, for your mother’s sake, let me... Oh! It has finally happened! Goodbye little silken undies with red hearts.
(He walks to the restroom)

The anonymous author’s and Beristáin’s scatology exemplifies the retaliations from actors and playwrights to Porfirian norms of etiquette. Not surprisingly then, these were some performat ic elements that caused laughter at a time when such norms were considered obsolete. These actions conform the “repertoire” in Diane Taylor’s sense; in this case a manifestation of disdain for the constrictions of the past and an announcement of changing times.

The role music played in reinforcing such depictions is lost. According to Morales, a Cuban cuplé and a rhumba were interpreted in this play, but, other than some scant references to the lyrics, no record or evidence of the music has survived. However, if the revistas and carpas were indeed derived from circus, one can infer that certain sonic interventions would have complemented the comic dialogue. Perhaps, following circus conventions of clownish acts, I can imagine a drum roll as Don Juan touched his belly in pain or a descending smear in the trombones – as Don Juan finally defecated. When entwined with theatrical motions and gesticulations, such simple musical gestures would have contributed to the humorous effect.

From the Streets to the Stage

Amelia Wilhelmy’s success came to a great extent as a result of the creativity and grace she imprinted

---

452 Idem.
on her comic characterizations. In fact, she is one of the female comedians who are best remembered for her agency in crafting her own characters, many of which were inspired by the popular subjects she claimed to have seen in the streets. If Monsiváis recalled male comedians playing the parts of “drunken females,” the opposite was also true. Cross-dressing was a typical practice among comedians, a feature which audiences seem to have liked in and by itself. One of Wilhelmy’s most celebrated characters was Juanito Mariguano, a veteran who, drunk or stoned, told stories about the past glories of the battles he fought. As Wilhelmy herself explained: “I have deeply studied these unfortunate Juanes who use their days off at the garrison to hide from their superiors and to visit bars and pulque houses in the barriadas in Mexico City, and who, once drunk, talk about their military campaigns.” Her off-stage account of the origins of her parodic personification is ambiguous. While Wilhelmy seems to show some sympathy for the human condition of such “unfortunate” personages, she is also critical on their classification of “heroes” by official nationalistic discourses. And, if her portrayal of them on stage was indeed mocking, then we can infer her disdain for military institutions altogether.

453 “Uno de nuestros soldados que, quizá alcoholizado o marihuano habla de campañas militares, relatadas en fragmentarias visiones anacrónicas.” Wilhelmy quoted in ídem, 108.

454 “he estudiado profundamente a estos Juanes desventurados que, aprovechan[do] los asuetos del cuartel, visitan a escondidas de sus superiores, las cantinas y las pulquerías de las barriadas de México, y ya ebrios hablan de sus campañas militares.” Idem.
An interesting point concerning the issue of representation can be drawn from Wilhelmy’s claim that real subjects inspired her characterizations. The act of transferring these popular urban subjects to the stage contributed to their gradual crystallization into caricaturized images. Noticeably, the resulting images were useful for entertainment purposes. According to Morales, during the years of the 1920s “the dirty and ragged became legendary in Mexican plays.” While using these images to contest the official ideology, Wilhelmy also reinforced the stereotype of the popular urban subject, adding to the stigma of the urban poor and dispossessed.

**Audience Performance and Acceptance of Social Archetypes for Theatrical Uses**

One question worth asking when debating about the popular in musical theater is whether people in the audience perceived the above comic characterizations as directed at themselves. The acceptance of such portrayals can be assessed by looking into narratives of audience behavior inside the theaters. The theater María Guerrero offers a window into these narratives. Beginning as a humble carpa-jacalón in the 1900s, this carpa theater had become an acclaimed and infamous venue.

---

455 Idem, 15.
in the 1920s. In spite of its bad reputation and poor conditions, the popularity of this theater far surpassed that of other modest jacalones. Highly ranked politicians, influential men and, of course, official inspectors frequently visited this venue out of curiosity, and perhaps also because of the fear it inspired among the circles of power. Remembering this place shortly after the start of the Revolution – at the time the theater María Guerrero was still registered in the Ayuntamiento as a carpa – the painter José Clemente Orozco wrote:

One of the places most frequented during [General] Huerta’s years [1913-1914] was the theater María Guerrero, also known as María Tepache, in the streets of Peralvillo. These were the best days of actors Beristáin and Acevedo, who created this unique genre. The audience was of the most hybrid [nature], the coarsest of the ‘peladaje,’ mixed with artists and intellectuals, with army officers and bureaucrats, political figures and even Secretaries of State.

In addition to testifying to the disparate audience, Orozco also reminisced about the audience’s active participation in the plays every night. As he noticed, responses from the people in the audience prompted actors to adjust their performance “on the go,” often in order to make people laugh. As a result, important components of these acts were based on improvisation. This is relevant because it reveals information unavailable in the archival registers of the musical repertory offered on a given night. Orozco elaborated:

The audience behaved worse than in bull-fights. They participated in the show and put themselves face to face with the actors and actresses, mutually insulting back and forth and alternating the dialogues in such a way that no two shows were ever the same, by effect of the improvisations. From the gallery section, all kind of projectiles fell on the audience at the luneta, including spit, pulque, worse liquids and, at times, the drunk people themselves fell with all their bones on the audience below. One can easily picture the sort of ‘works’ performed by both audience and actors. All sort of coarse remarks [leperadas] burst out in the dense and nauseating environment, and the scenes were often of the most alarming sort. However, there was great inventiveness and stupendous

---

456 Tepache is a traditional alcoholic drink made of fermented pineapple, with a distinctive pungent smell.

457 “Uno de los lugares más concurridos durante el Huertismo [1913-1914] fue el Teatro María Guerrero, conocido también por María Tepache, en las calles de Peralvillo. Eran los mejores días de los actores Beristáin y Acevedo, que crearon este género único. El público era de lo más híbrido, lo más soez del “peladaje” se mezclaba con intelectuales y artistas, con oficiales del ejercito y de la burocracia, personajes políticos y hasta secretarios de Estado.” José Clemente Orozco, Autobiografía (México: Ediciones Occidente, 1945), 45.
characterizations from Beristáin and Acevedo, who created the types of female pot smokers, prisoners or gendarmes marvellously. The ‘actresses’ were all old and decrepit.\textsuperscript{458}

Orozco differentially appraised the merit of actors over actresses by calling the latter “old and decrepit.” It is possible that the painter was referring not to female comedians but rather to the many Spanish tiples that had been the delights of Mexico City’s audiences during the 1880s and 1890s and who, still on stage decades later, caused the derisive reviews of theater critics in the 1910s and 1920s. Other than the tiples, most revista actresses were not decrepit. At the time, many female actresses and singers were also successful theater impresarios. In fact, many of them, including Wilhelmy, played active roles in the development of political theater both in formal houses and in carpas. Orozco may have also evinced sexist attitudes that tried to lessen the artistic merit of these women in view of their new social positions. If this were true – though this is a less likely explanation due to the abundance of factual harsh criticism of old Spanish tiples – then these two comedians may have contributed to such hostility by parodying the old fashioned singers, something that could be interpreted as a scornful gesture at the Porfirian past. [It is also possible that Acevedo and Beristáin parodied these old-fashioned singers in drag, as a scornful gesture at the Porfirian past.]

Orozco provides vivid details of the performance of the audience. Again, if these actions conform the “repertoire” that serve as performative manifestations of the memories of cultural traits, then the apparently enthusiastic participation of these publics in their own denigration is one of the most problematic aspects when dealing with the topic of representation. Indeed, the painter

\textsuperscript{458} “La concurrencia se portaba peor que en los toros; tomaba parte en la representación y se ponían al tío por tío con actores y actrices, insultándose mutuamente y alternando los diálogos en tal forma que no había dos representaciones iguales a fuerza de improvisaciones. Desde la galería caían sobre el público de la luneta toda clase de proyectiles, incluyendo escupitajos, pulque, líquidos peores y, a veces, los borrachos mismos iban a dar con sus huesos sobre los concurrentes de abajo. Puede fácilmente imaginarse que clase de “obras” se representaban entre actores y público. Las leperadas estallaban en el ambiente denso y nauseabundo y las escenas eran frecuentemente de los más alarmante. Sin embargo, había mucho ingenio y caracterizaciones estupendas de Beristáin y de Acevedo, quienes creaban tipos de marihuanas, de presidiarios, o de gendarmes maravillosamente. Las ‘actrices’ eran todas aiquísimas y deformes.” Idem.
himself asked why the supposedly marginal people accepted such demeaning representations of themselves. He believed that:

Prostitutes, urban workers, ministers and ‘intellectuals’ in the gallery section, add themselves to the disheveled fury. They attest the debut of characters that encode social tendencies and passing phenomena. The character of the ‘payo’, for example, the ever-dazzled subject, scatter-brained even in his attire, represents for decades the contempt for those who have just arrived in the capital city. A lépero, (a marginal) who feels represented on stage, increases his value even in his own eyes because [his] social invisibility has been the first strategy of oppression.\footnote{"Prostitutas y obreros, ministros e “intelectuales” en galería se añaden a la furia relajenta, atestiguan los debuts de personajes que cifran tendencias sociales y fenómenos migratorios. El personaje del “payo,” por ejemplo, el sujeto siempre deslumbrante, campesino atolondrado desde la facha, representa por décadas el desprecio hacia los recién llegados a la capital. Un lépero (un marginal) que se siente representado sobre el escenario acrecienta su valor ante sí mismo, porque la invisibilidad social ha sido la primera estrategia de dominio.” Orozco quoted in Monsiváis, "La cultura popular en la Revolución mexicana,” 157.}

Orozco’s account reveals an interesting relation to the topic of representation in the two senses that Gayatri Spivak distinguished: \textit{Darstellung} and \textit{Vertretung}. As Orozco observed, the fact that the “marginal” people he perceived to have made up the audience accepted such representations of themselves (\textit{Darstellung}) shows that they obeyed a desire, maybe a need, for the visibility they would not have had otherwise. It was the actors who provided this opportunity, even if mediated, to represent them (\textit{Vertretung}). As a result, he concludes, a “marginal” accepts these portraits because he sees himself represented by the actors; and this contributes to accept the domination to which such marginal audience members were subjected.

The question of the extent to which the people in the audience were “marginal” members of society is central to this dissertation. In this passage, Orozco posed a paradox: by first listing ministers and “intellectuals,” he noticed that members of the audience were not necessarily nor only the “marginal” people of society. And even if he referred to intellectuals in quotation marks, his sarcastic tone aimed to deflate the cultural pretentiousness of some educated men in the audience.

Second, Orozco alluded to the \textit{payo} as the archetypical character that urban people despised. Then, he defined the lépero as a “marginal” who – being a member of the audience – sees himself
represented on stage. With this, Orozco assumes that the lépero is not only a theatrical representation, but an actual person in the audience, somehow passively accepting how comedians depicted him. If not explicitly, his sequential mention of the payo, and then of “the marginal” implicates one another. The association seems to result from archaic and deeply engrained conceptions of Indians as peasants who represent the rural lifestyle. Orozco participates in this conflation in a manner similar to Monsiváis, when he proposes that:

This is maybe why the offended themselves have accepted racism for so long. Indian peasants who laugh at the stereotypes of the ‘indito’ [a theatrical character], urban pariahs who find amusement in the mockeries that comedians do of them, domestic employees who celebrate the cruel parodies in films, [all] consider marginalization so invincible that for them it is enough to “be considered.”

While such amalgamation may seem reductive and condescending, Orozco demonstrated a strong social sensibility about the pernicious racism of Mexican society and a clear interest in denouncing a historic social illness, easily verifiable on a day-to-day basis. As I have argued, the Indian/peasant were two undistinguishable components of a single entity, according to the idiosyncratic view of the Mexican middle and upper class. Orozco, as a member of those classes, is not in a position to notice his own prejudice about the supposed passivity of the allegedly marginal, whom he presumes to have identified with the caricatures on stage.

And still, the question of who the members of the audience at the theater Maria Guererro were, and how they interpreted the depictions on the stage, remains just as problematic. Taking Orozco’s views at face value, the audience was hybrid in terms of social standing and thus it was hard, if not impossible, to discern who were the “marginal” and what their responses were. Possibly, if there were politicians or intellectuals in the audience, they would not have identified with marginalized characters. Similarly, people who had suffered marginalization as a result of their

460 “Quizá por eso dura tanto la aceptación del racismo de parte de los propios ofendidos. Los campesinos indígenas que rien con los estereotipos del “indito,” los pariahs urbanos que se divierten con la burla que de ellos hacen los cómicos, las empleadas domésticas que festejan las parodias crueles del cine, consideran tan invencible la marginación que les basta “ser tomados en cuenta.” Idem.
ethnicity, social standing or occupation may have not necessarily seen themselves depicted on stage. It is possible too that people who had migrated to the city and were willingly undergoing the process of integration to urban culture may have seen themselves as already integrated, distant from the characters on stage. In some cases, these theatrical forms may have also made people in the audience distinguish between collective and individual identities. It may have been possible to recognize a member of the group to which they thought themselves to have belonged and who, while not being “them,” was a familiar type among their group; thus, they appreciated their group being recognized while also feeling superior to the type being ridiculed. And lastly, there could have been disenfranchised people in the audience who, even if noticing their own marginal condition, did not equate it to the satirical representations they witnessed, or simply did not accept it as faithful or realistic depictions of their own condition.

*Darstellung* was available to actors and actresses on stage, who dispersed their ideas about who they saw as the marginal in society, but manipulated them either to make people laugh, or to advance their own political agendas. While not necessarily “voiced” through explicit speeches, the actors’ theatrical depictions may have included gestural elements, either sympathizing or mocking this perceived marginality, thus adding more layers of representation (both *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*) to theatrical performances. The ones left out of the game would be the voiceless Indians, peasants and urban marginals. As Spivak later proposed, the subaltern perspective can be traced through actions aimed to be “read,” and which reclaim the voice denied to the disenfranchised. In this sense, traces of the “vanishing presence” of these subjects can be found in Orozco’s recollections of the audience performance. This, as performative action and however mediated, may have opened a possible window to examine political agency. However sympathetic he may have been, Orozco
perpetuated a sentimental view of Indians or, simply, the “lower classes,” as passive victims, thus undermining the subversive power of their retaliatory actions.\footnote{Later on in his book, contesting the theory of mestizaje, Orozco criticizes the post-revolutionary government’s nationalism for what he deems its patronizing policies (namely, the creation of the Departamento de Asuntos Indígenas (Office of Indigenous Affairs). In his view, the institution infantilizes Indians as “miserable and underage people, incapable of doing anything by themselves,” 102. While his criticism is inspired by an ideal of egalitarianism it nonetheless disregards the need for such remedial measures. Orozco’s complex view of the problem of the Indians as what we would now call the ‘subaltern’ is particularly interesting and more complicated than I could possibly explain here. May this note only serve to illustrate the complexities of the problem of indigenous agency in the context of post-revolutionary Mexico. See Orozco, \textit{Autobiografía}, 99-106.}{461}

Not all theatrical characterizations of the indigenous peasantry, or of “el pueblo” were affably accepted. An example would be an incident in 1914, in which displeased members of the audience contested mention of Emiliano Zapata and representations of “el pueblo” in the revista \textit{El país de la metralla}. Apparently, the problem emerged in a number in which the revolutionary politicians Venustiano Carranza and José María Maytorena – respectively renamed “Vespaciano” and “Cantorena” – were satirically depicted as separatists who planned to sell the state of Sonora to the United States. By contrast, the revolutionary forced of the south, and whose leader was Emiliano Zapata, were portrayed as bellicose and undesirable. In this fiction, the “pueblo” opposed Cantorena and Vespaciano’s initiative and rejected identifications with Emiliano Zapata by saying:

\begin{verbatim}
Cantorena: !Llegó la hora de tu ayuda!
Pueblo: ¿Qué hay que hacer?
Vespaciano: Pelear hasta independer [sic] el Estado de Sonora.
Cantorena: Hay que entregar ese estado a la Unión Americana.
Pueblo: A los gringos?
Ambos: ¡Sí!
Pueblo: ¡Ni soy Zapata, ni quiero!
    !Y onque ora me train en guerra
    y ando a saltos y respingos,
    ninca les dare a los gringos
    ni un pedazo de mi tierra!
Cantorena: The time for you to help has come.
People: What is there to do?
Vespaciano: To fight until the state of Sonora is Independent.
C: We have to surrender this state to the Americans
P: to the gringos?
Both: Yes!
P: I’d rather be lamb!
    I am no Zapata, nor do I want to be!
    I am the Mexican people!
    And although I am in war now
    In jumps and shocks
    I will never give the gringos
\end{verbatim}
Gerardo Luzuriaga has explained: “if one of the revolutionary fractions represented the popular sectors, it was precisely the one led by Zapata, but here [in *El país de la metralla*] the “pueblo” is perversely defined as contrary to and as a victim of Zapatist insurgents." Therefore, people in the audience who sympathized with Zapata’s project, (perhaps the peasants, farmers, Indians or domestic servants, that Orozco presumed to be among the urban audience of the revistas and carpas) responded distraught. Even more outrageous, Luzuriaga explains, was Elizondo’s indication in the script: “the pueblo dresses with a luxurious charro attire.” This visual characterization of the Mexican pueblo “ends up being really that of the rich landlord [*hacendado*] who pretends to speak for the people.”

Days later, Elizondo got anonymous death threats after which he decided to go into exile in Havana. Resistance to these theatrical representations illustrates the historical agency of that sector of the audience. This section was removed from the revista in subsequent performances. In August 1914, a journalist signing as “Ronquillo” and who published in the newspaper *El Imparcial* agreed that: “It was the right thing to do, to remove the character of Emiliano Zapata, which was not liked by the audience. Zapata is a character dignified enough to only appear in the crossroads of deserted lands, and not on the stage of a theater.” Such radical responses to scornful representations to the figure of Zapata suggest how certain people in the audience protected the symbols with which they

---

463 Idem, 19.

464 José F. Elizondo fled the country in 1914 to find refuge in Cuba, and did not return to Mexico until 1920. As Miguel Angel Morales recounts: “The morning after, Elizondo took the train to Veracruz, a port occupied by American troops. His family told him in a letter that several times soldiers went to his house looking for him, reason for which he decided to go into definitive exile in Havana.” (“A la mañana siguiente Elizondo, tomó el tren para Veracruz, puerto ocupado por tropas norteamericanas. Sus familiares le informaron por carta que varias veces piquetes de soldados lo fueron a buscar a su casa, por lo que que definitivamente decidió exiliarse en la Habana.” Morales, *Cómicos de México*, 21.

465 “Fue un acierto el haber quitado la figura poco grata de Emiliano Zapata, que no fue del agrado del público. Zapata es un personaje digno solo de figurar en las encrucijadas de los caminos desiertos y no sobre las tablas de un teatro.” Ronquillo quoted in Idem, 22.
might have identified. The language in Ronquillo’s remark also allows for another interpretation, namely, that Zapata was too threatening a figure to the more bourgeois elements of the audience. Due to his position as an empowered Indian, this agrarian leader was too unfathomable a character to the general viewer to be successfully used by comedians for mocking purposes. Luzuriaga closes his analysis by stating: “Although the Mexican capital remained a bastion of the Porfirian ideology, the sympathizers of the Revolution were more numerous each time, therefore the satiric author ought to consider also those listeners who did not share his political views and who felt closer to the ‘hero’ being ridiculed.”

The case above demonstrates that Orozco’s assumptions that “the marginal” passively accepted representations were flawed. The problem with Orozco’s treacherous logics seems to be conflation of the lépero – a partially mythical character coined in literature and theater – with the actual marginal of society, who clearly had more power of response than educated people like Orozco anticipated. Far from being a personal judgment (and by no means exclusive to Orozco), general belief in the passivity of the disenfranchised Indian-peasant is a symptom of a greater postcolonial condition affecting the educated (which is to say the “subjectively colonized”) in Mexican society. However, it was these educated people who crafted ideas of social class. As cultural tropes, the lépero of the nineteenth century and his updated twentieth century version the pelado, crystallized some of the attributes of marginal groups, yet these were representations of the “popular classes,” the “poor,” the “Indians,” the “subaltern” that the educated members of society used to craft their own identities. The distinction between these tropes of the marginal and the actual marginal of society is critical to understanding the symbolic workings of intersubjective formations

---

466 Indeed, Emiliano Zapata remains one of the most significant historical figures among Indian peasants. He was turned into an icon of their social cause from the 1910s and at the end of the twentieth century the figure of Emiliano Zapata was reclaimed by Mayan Indian peasants who, in the anti-neoliberal uprising in 1994, named their insurgent indigenous army the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional. (Zapatista National Liberation Army)

of social class. When treated as heuristic devices, these tropes render visible the traces that the “subaltern” left; namely, the pressures they imposed into the privileged of society in Mexico in the early twentieth century.

The Pelado as an Icon of the “Popular”

Through theatrical uses, the pelado of the early carpas responded to the Mexican state’s discriminatory modernization by transforming the social stigmata of poverty and cultural marginalization into emblems of identity. As Broyles-González pointed out: “the performance logic of these characters [the many varieties of pelados] pivots around their maneuvers within the larger established social order and its system of power relations.”

This stock character can be therefore understood as an artifact of civil resistance. One may even refer to this character as an ephemeral decolonial mechanism. Straddling the line between coarse barbarity and idealized progress, the pelado of the early carpas can be thought of as an insurgent figure that sought to deride a modernity that had been denied to him/her. Significantly, despite their negative aspect both terms, lépero and pelado, entailed positive attributes, such as cleverness, sagacity, and resourcefulness to trick authority.

Carleton Beals, an American journalist and crusader with special interest in Latin America, traveled to Mexico after the Revolution, (years 1919-1921, and then again during the first half of the 1920s). He captured his impressions of the carpas shows in a book illustrated with drawings by famous painter Diego Rivera. Beals noticed that the deployment of popular archetypes for theatrical use in general, and the pelado, its most distinct star, in particular, helped people make sense of the new social dynamics. “The contrast between city and urban life,” he explained, “is always to the fore. For instance, the clever but shallow city fifí. His nimble tongue and sophistication are set over

---

against the simple, credulous countryside Indian, who, though easily duped, proves at bottom, much to the delight of the audience, far wiser than his city-baiter.\textsuperscript{469} The Indian that Beals referred to was the urban prankster who interacted with other city dwellers. Meanwhile, the stock character of the fifi reflected the urbanized, well-dressed youngster who was selfish, uneducated, and misogynist.\textsuperscript{470} As Beals argued, these characters captured the new urban working class by juxtaposing the well-spoken, “civilized” urban subject – still the elite’s legitimate citizen – and the displaced, backwards, and yet witty Indian.

Understanding the pelado’s process of cultural assimilation requires considering Bishnupriya Ghosh’s distinction between the “subaltern” and the “popular,” as well as her notion of the “popular icon.”\textsuperscript{471} Exploring the relation between the notion of the subaltern to the one of the popular, this scholar claimed that the two categories are incommensurate, stating that:

The subaltern is not in the business of codification, and, classically, has no access to lines of communication. Popular culture, on the other hand, parleys in codes, often appropriating and modifying dominant semiotic codes that uphold existing hegemony. Hence when the popular apprehends the subaltern, there is always an act of translation, a re-codification of the subaltern subject and her acts in accordance with the desires of specific populations or publics.\textsuperscript{472}

The subversive power of Mexican people’s performance in everyday life can be acknowledged as long as those who were discriminated against in Mexican society contested the discrimination with actions, regardless of whether they were on stage or not. Instances of disrespect, defiance of authorities, and refusal to abide by hegemonic social norms accounted for the behavior of those labeled as “pelados.” It is possible that actors and audience members of the carpas who had been referred to as “pelados”


\textsuperscript{470} Peter Clair Haney has analyzed the figure of the fifi, or the catrín, as a character that countered expectations of male behavior. Clair Haney, 196.


\textsuperscript{472} Idem, 459.
could have identified with the theatrical contestation. As Spivak explained, these are instances of performative acts prone to be read as the dim traces of the subaltern. In other words, the processes of enactment, mimesis and/or representation (Darstellung) brought the traces of those people of the streets to the stage.

Nonetheless, as Ghosh explained, the “subaltern” within these enactments is evasive, or as Spivak described, he/she remains voiceless. From the moment that these figures were turned into theatrical characters, their language, their cultural codes had to be translated, that is, adjusted to the codes of those for whom these representations were targeted. This would explain why the pelado could only be apprehended as a mythical and quintessential urban otherness, otherwise unintelligible under the codes of the educated elites. Granted the lack of political representation of the marginal, what is important to notice here is that, such evasiveness is what allows the subaltern to subvert the existing (hegemonic) semiotic codes. It is precisely the inapprehensible quality of the subaltern that has led Gosh to conceive of him/her as an insurgent with a certain degree of political agency. Such semiotic incommensurability is the cause that the figures of the lépero or the pelado are figures already assimilated to the understandings of the hegemonic culture.

The ‘icon’ and the ‘subaltern’ move in different directions. The subaltern affords a glimpse of a social invisible in political representation while the hyper-visible icon masks the very social that gives it purchase. Such an opposition reduces icons only to their most-circulated commodity form, and misses the critical contestations of political power prevalent in the practice of icon-making.

It was Cantinflas, the pelado as performed by former carpas actor Mario Moreno Reyes, who served as the vehicle to bring the marginal subject into popular acclaim and who stood as the most visible “popular icon.” Cantinflas’ initial popularity among the carpas audiences and this character’s

---

473 Paraphrasing Guha, Gosh explains: “As insurgent, the subaltern exerts pressure on semiotic codes that maintain established political and moral hierarchies systems ‘waxed fat on signs’ codifying authority […] If relations of dominance and subordination are regulated by basic codes of language, gesture, or habit, the subaltern’s code-switching, the ‘real turning of things upside down,’ radically subverts existing codification.” Idem, 459.

474 Idem, 462.
extraordinary success in the film and television industries have justifiably inspired several authors to write detailed biographies of Moreno and to devote lengthy critical studies to the figure of Cantinflas as the pelado par excellence.\(^{475}\) Indistinguishably enmeshing the character with the man, these authors have interpreted him as the living proof of the Mexican’s characteristic inferiority complex, as a response to the Mexican paradigm of modernity, as a transgressor of gender roles, as a puppet of the state’s interests, as a business man in the disguise of a philanthropist, or as a conservative spokesperson involved in union politics.\(^{476}\) Without belittling his talent, or reckoning his ability to seize the opportunities of the moment, I consider Moreno/Cantinflas a “hinge” figure that marked an irreversible turning point in the history of the carpas. “In the right time at the right place,” he was in the position to craft his iconic pelado as a figure of civil resistance and, few years later, surrender it to the industry of mainstream entertainment for its domestication, in the interests of the post-revolutionary and nationalistic Mexican state. Born in the neighborhood of Santa María la Redonda and raised in the stigmatized neighborhood of Tepito, Moreno bore the authority to represent the subaltern—again in both senses of the word. And yet his character Cantinflas simultaneously marked the peak and the death of the pelado as an insurgent articulation of the urban marginal.

Moreno and those who adopted his interpretation of the pelado, such as Arturo Copel “El Cuate Chón,” Jesús Martínez “Palillo,” Armando Soto, La Marina, “Chicotito,” Antonio Espino “Clavillazo,” Adalberto Martínez “Resortes,” began what I refer to as the second period of the

\(^{475}\) In his biography of Mario Moreno Cantinflas, Jeffery Pilcher elaborates a genealogy of the pelado figure addressed to English readers and offers a synthesis of Mexican scholarship on the subject. See, Jeffrey M. Pilcher, \textit{Cantinflas and the Chaos of Mexican Modernity}. (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, 2001). The fact that the film \textit{Cantinflas} – premiered in 2014, directed by Sebastian del Amo and starring Óscar Jaenada – has been selected by the Mexican Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences to represent Mexico at the Academy Awards, only confirms the media success of the comedian and the historical endurance his character has enjoyed.

carpas (1930-1950). In several testimonies, actors in and commentators on carpa culture later observed that it was during this period that actors and actresses gradually began to lose agency to convey their own ideas about the pelados as marginal-rebellious subjects. For example, unlike Amelia Wilhelmy and the young Mario Moreno himself, Delia Magaña did not decide on the details of the characters she interpreted in the 1920s revistas. She reminisced that:

Indeed, I was called to audition for Mr. Eduardo Arozamena, […] who told me ‘Great, this is stupendous.’ He thought that I was very good. But I was just like any fifteen year old girl who dreams with the fairies and thinks of herself as pretty, beautiful and important, and I said: ‘Will I wear feathered costumes?’ – just like those that I had seen in theaters. To my great surprise, he said: ‘You are going to be a great comedian.’ I did not know what that was, and I said yes. At night, I was taken to the Candelaria de los Patos [a neighborhood by the Texcoco lakeshore]. I asked what was I doing there, and was told that I was going to see the drunken women, the poor people, the humble ones, because ‘you are going to be a character like these.’ I then said no. I said that I did not want to become an artist any more. But that is how I started.477

This revealing quote highlights the problematic issue of whether theatrical representations (Darstellung) serve to represent the people in the audiences of the carpas shows and the marginal people of society. Delia Magaña’s young age and eagerness to belong to the world of entertainment made her easy prey for the early industry of stardom. Her naïveté exemplifies one of many cases in which actors and actresses were detached from any politics of representation. Her testimony suggests that she had little to no connection to the people she was taught to emulate. As a performer in established revista theaters (and later in films and TV), the people that she saw in the streets were not part of her life either. Her coaches were catering to an audience that did not identify with people like the pelados, but enjoyed seeing them parodied on stage.

Commercial success necessarily detached carpa comedians from the political agenda of the

477 “Efectivamente, me hizo una prueba el señor Eduardo Arozamena […] y me dijo ‘Muy bien, estupendo’; le parecí muy buena. Pero yo pensaba como toda niña de quince años que sueña con las hadas, que se siente también una muy bonita, muy hermosa, muy importante, y dije: ‘¿Voy a salir con plumas?’ así como veía en el teatro. Pero cuál sería mi sorpresa que me dijo ‘Tú vas a ser una gran actriz cómica’. Yo no sabía qué cosa era eso y le dije que sí. Me llevan a la Candelaria de los Patos en la noche. Pregunté qué iba a hacer allí y me dijeron que ver a las borrachas, a la gente pobre, a la gente humilde, a las borrachitas ‘porque tú vas a ser un personaje como ése’. Dije que no, que así no quería ser artista, pero así empecé.” Delia Magaña quoted in Socorro Merlin, Vida y milagros, 119.
subaltern. As the post-1930 entertainment-industry entrepreneurs gradually encouraged the inclusion of this character in comic sketches at the carpas shows, films and radio shows, the pelado in comedy began losing the marginal, peripheral semiotic condition that had provided its original significance as a countercultural expression. Not surprisingly, the pelado was innocuously renamed “peladito” years later, thus literally diminishing his corrosive effect. This made him become a character of critical symbolic import in the establishment of renewed social hierarchies in the new, modern Mexico of the twentieth century.

Gradually, the subterfuge figures of the early carpas became mere instruments of the entertainment industry. In his testimony, Clemente Orozco also noticed this significant change in the social function of the pelado, explaining that:

"Later on, this genre degenerated (not paradoxically) and became political and family friendly. It became touristic. Tehuana choirs were introduced with jícara [güira bowls], black charros, and sentimental cheesy songs by songbooks [or song writers] from Los Angeles and San Antonio, Texas, all things that were really unbearable and in the worst taste, but dear to the decent families living in apartment houses and housing complexes [vecindades], as they used to be called. The punishment came soon after. Everything ended in the film industry and in the horrible radio with its presenters, its loudspeakers and its never-ending nonsense." Orozco, *Autobiografía*, 45.

478 "Posteriormente, este género de teatro se degeneró (no es paradoja), se volvió político y propio para familias. Se hizo turístico. Fue introducido el coro de tehuanas con jícara, charros negros y canciones sentimentales y cursis por cantoneros de Los Angeles y San Antonio Texas, cosas todas éstas verdaderamente inssoportables y del peor gusto, pero caras a las familias decentes de las casas de apartamentos o de vecindad, como antes se llamaban. El castigo no se hizo esperar. todo acabó en el cine y en el horrible radio con sus locutores, magnavoces y ncedades interminables." Orozco, *Autobiografía*, 45.
served communities of immigrants as instruments of cultural resistance. If initially, comedy and musical acts in Mexico City’s carpas served a comparable purpose of resistance, though which some alienated social actors acquired greater public visibility, this was not longer the case after the intervention of the entertainment industry.

Notwithstanding the presence of retaliatory performances, even in the Mexican carpas not all actors or actresses sought to “give voice” to the marginal, nor were they all committed to political projects. In fact, many of the early carpas shows, and their personnel, were just struggling with cultural survival *vis-à-vis* the profound cultural changes that followed the Revolution. The different political approaches among actors of the same community permit us to notice a distinction between cases of cultural persistence – via cultural transformation– and those that are open cases of cultural resistance, either against institutions or against greater historical processes. This distinction lays the foundation for understanding how performance contributed to shape the social memories that ended up determining narratives of the popular within the carpas, and subjective notions of social class. These are both topics I address in the next and last chapter.

---

The Mexican people palpitated; the blood of the youth was in effervescence, the new race, the sons of the Revolution. Not having anywhere to express themselves, people turned to the fairs and squares full of our typical archetypes, such as street vendors, the taco and food stalls, and the lottery games where corn grains were thrown on the floor and at which vagrants gathered seeking the alms. There, the *huarache* [indigenous sandals] mingled with patent leather, and white cotton Indian’s pants mingled with English cashmere and denim. The carnivals and fairs—but first and foremost “The Carpa”—had the virtue of making and creating the happiness that had barely begun to clean the streets from the blood that had been shed for the sake of revolutionary freedom.


The aristocratic miss who drinks her tea at a Sanborns coffee shop, the man driving his automobile, the politician, the student, the modest employee, the intellectual, they all attend the carpa, whatever its price, whatever the discomfort it presents or its remoteness; in it, sitting next to the man of the people [el hombre del pueblo] whom they had previously seen disdainfully and who, despite the position of the conquered that he represents, contributes the elements for the formation of a theater art that awaits its definitive realization as a national art.

Julio Bracho “La Carpa” (1936).481

[Among the primal areas of theater] the carpa theater of Mexico can be included. The popular is its element, its expression, its sin. Its improvised characters are familiar to us…Because all they do is to struggle with false or unbelievable propositions, all they do is to mimic the movements that are also the movements of the people in the *barrio*. It is the best experimental theater, without even intending to be. Inside it – creating it and expressing it - the man of the people [el hombre del pueblo] lives regularly. The language used in the carpa brings the nerves to the edge […] The carpa theater does nothing more than put into circulation and consecrate the sin on stage; that fantasy of the Mexican people; which wants nothing more than to organize the lively images dispersed in the *barrio*.

Antonio Magaña Esquivel, “La Revolución y el Teatro popular” (1950).482

---

480 “El pueblo mexicano palpitaba, la sangre joven estaba en ebullición, la nueva raza, los hijos producto de la Revolución. No teniendo donde explayarse se lanzaban a las ferias, a la plazuela llena de tipos tan clásicamente nuestros, como los vendedores ambulantes, los puestos de tacos y fritangas, la lotería de tablitas donde se apuntaba la figura con maíz que caía al suelo y que recogían los indigentes en busca de pitanza…Ahí se mezclaban en huarache con el charol y el calzón blanco con el casimir ingles y la mezclilla. Las ferias y las kermesses, pero sobre todo “La Carpa” tuvieron la virtud de hacer y crear la felicidad que aún no acababa de limpiar de las calles la sangre derramada en aras de la libertad revolucionaria.” Granados, *Carpas de México*, 100.

481 “La señorita aristócrata que toma el té en Sanborns, el hombre de automóvil, el político, el estudiante, el sencillo empleado, el intelectual, acuden a la carpa, cualquiera que sea su precio, las incomodidades que presenta, la distancia a que se encuentra, y en ella, sentados al lado del hombre del pueblo que en otra ocasión verían con desdén, van contribuyendo, a pesar del papel de conquistados que representan, la formación de los elementos de un teatro que espera su realización definitiva como teatro nacional.” Julio Bracho, "La carpa." *El Nacional*, Suplemento Cultural, (Octubre 11, 1936). Compiled in *Cultura popular vista desde la élites*, Op cit. 275.

482 “En el territorio primario del teatro […] puede incluirse al teatro de carpa en México. Lo popular es su elemento, su expresión y su pecado. Sus personajes, improvisados, nos son familiares […] porque no hacen sino forjar con proposiciones falsas o insólitas, porque no hacen sino ejecutar movimientos que los son también de los hombres del
The three quotes above illustrate three different moments of remembrance of the carpas shows. The first, by Pedro Granados, is the one furthest in temporal distance from the heyday of the carpas, yet it is the only one told by an actual former member of the carpas audiences. Published in the 1980s, Pedro Granados’ book Las carpas de México is a detailed and sentimental retrospective testimony of a fond frequenter of these entertainment centers. In his account, Granados remembers the urban environment of downtown Mexico City in the years following the armed phase of the war of Revolution (1910-1917). Entangled in his narration are his memories of archetypical urban figures walking in the streets. As he recalls, while the streets “had not been entirely clean from the bloodshed,” people of all social classes mingled and participated in public activities: an implicit though clear reference to the myth of the “cosmic race”, crafted by the nationalist ideologue José Vasconcelos in 1925. Granados conjures the nationalistic sentiment instilled in public life during the post-revolutionary period. But, despite this reference, the goal of his recollection is not to praise the nation but rather to guide his readers through his memories of the carpas as a much-needed source of happiness and social repair after the war of Revolution.

The affection with which Granados describes his memories at the carpas contrasts sharply with the analytical point of view of Julio Bracho, theater director, producer and screenwriter who, writing well into the 1930s and at the peak of the nationalistic movement, saw in the carpas a promise for the final realization of “national theater.” While Bracho acknowledges the socially varied conformation of the carpas’ audiences, he points to the presence of the hombre del pueblo (man of the barrio. Es el mejor teatro experimental, sin proponérselo. Dentro de él, creándolo, expresándolo, vive regularmente el hombre del pueblo. A flor de piel está el lenguaje que usa el teatro de carpa. [...] El teatro de carpa no hace sino poner en circulación, consagrar en el pecado escénico, esta fantasía del pueblo de México; en realidad no busca sino organizar vivas imágenes disueltas en el barrio.” Antonio Magaña Esquivel, "La Revolución y el teatro popular" in Cultura popular vista por las élites: Antología de artículos publicados entre 1920 y 1952, ed. by Irene Vázquez Valle, 265-70. (México, D.F.: UNAM, 1950), 13-14.

José Vasconcelos’ essay La raza cósmica, (The Cosmic Race), first published in 1925, became part of the literary canon whereby the myth of the “new race” embodied in the Mexican mestizo was founded. See Jose Vasconcelos, La Raza Cosmica (Mexico: Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1966).
people), as a transparent entity next to which the elites occasionally sit and who provides the basis for what he calls the “national dramatic art.”

Finally, literature and theater critic Antonio Magaña Esquivel expresses what in my view is a more convoluted interpretation of the carpas’ social function. Like Bracho, Magaña Esquivel believes that the true “hombre del pueblo” inhabits the carpas. He also considers “the popular” as the building block of expressivity at the carpas. But his opaque assessment that, through “sin on stage” the carpas “consecrated the fantasy of the Mexican pueblo” makes one wonder what in those staged performances he considered sin or fantasy. He, however, assigns a very precise function to the carpas: “to organize the living images scattered in the barrio.”

Despite their differences, all three memories refer to the people in the streets, and identify these urban characters as typical representatives of the Mexican people. With this they make a strong connection between the carpas shows and related ideas of “the popular” and the barrio. For Granados, “people in the streets” coexisted with the carpas as part of the urban environment; they were mere archetypes, which I interpret as ideal models that represent social or behavioral patterns. By contrast, for both Esquivel and Bracho, these urban characters were real, flesh and bone subjects who embodied the essence of both the “pueblo” and the carpas. The apparent difference in the style of these testimonies can be attributed more to the different experiential position of the narrating subjects, and less to the social positions each of them occupied. For one, none of these men was an actor or musician at the carpas, much less would any of them conceive of himself as one of the archetypical figures of the “pueblo” they so persistently describe.

The abundance of contradictory accounts of the social composition of the carpas make one believe that the carpas were not always, and not necessarily, associated with the poor classes. In the first registers of the carpas kept at the Ayuntamiento Office, officers and inspectors reported that
carpas were centers “amenable for people from all social classes.” Concordantly, both Granados’ and Bracho’s accounts suggest too that the carpas’ audiences had a socially varied composition. Furthermore, the fact that Granados – a successful businessman – frequently attended the carpas shows, hints at the possibility that the carpas audiences comprised people from all classes. Moreover, early accounts of the carpas dating from the 1920s refer to them simply as a form of entertainment derived from the established revista shows. If anything, in this decade the carpas were plainly referred to as “jacalones de zarzuela” (small and improvised zarzuela theaters) or as “revista theaters with less resources.”

Why was it, then, that as time passed and the carpas acquired greater visibility, intellectuals, theater critics, and writers started to construct them as spaces for the “poor”? As I explained in chapter two, it was most likely the humble infrastructure of the teatros-jacalones and the frugality of their productions that, in the context of urban modernization, marginalized and eventually pauperized these shows. However, one of the questions that has intrigued me most is why protagonists of these shows accepted and eventually adopted this class-identity label, to the extent that they began to retrospectively refer to the carpas as “teatro para el pueblo.” Similarly, these social actors also began to conceive of themselves as part of an abstract collectivity identified as “the poor.”

Paradoxically, the carpas were never seen as so “essentially popular” and “poor” as when they stopped being marginal. Between years 1930-1950, during the period I have identified as their second phase, the carpas became part of the local industry of entertainment. Entire companies or selected actors were relocated in newly-built formal theaters which, though small in comparison with the principal theaters of the city, were much better equipped than the former canvas-tent theaters.

From the early 1930s, many of the carpas stars began to figure in the newly introduced radio broadcasting system and then in the incipient film industry, as the case of Mario Moreno, "Cantinflas" illustrates. Because of the visibility these actors enjoyed, the carpas started to be conceived under the guise of the “authentically poor.”

This chapter is concerned with how, when, and why the carpas came to be constructed ex post facto predominantly as shows for the poor. I consider the possible reasons behind the existence of two divergent memories of the carpas and the larger political agendas to which each of them responded. My goal is to explain why one of these memories – the one of the carpas as “poor” theater – has been dominant, while its counterpart has been obscured. To explain this, I explore how social memories around the carpas were reworked in a version that prescribed the conduct, the appearance and the taste of the carpa audiences by directly, and often arbitrarily, connecting them to “the popular classes.” This connection was made possible through narrative mechanisms that, within the larger context of the post-revolution, helped restructure the social order. Through examination of the connections between the space of the barrio, the carpas shows themselves, and surviving memories around them, I claim that the dominant narrations of the carpas shows indirectly taught people the place they were to occupy socially, symbolically, and spatially. In the long term, the stigma of the “poor” associated with the carpas shows and its community of attendants was subjectively internalized and eventually reclaimed by its participants, to be re-crafted as an emblem of class-identity.

My interpretation of the formation of a collective sense of social class around the carpas is informed by a line of research that has addressed the ways in which history, memory, forgetfulness, concealment, narrative, and embodiment are all entangled in the making of subjectified collective identities. This body of scholarly work is concerned with phenomenological approaches to the
senses as repositories of cultural memory. Such approaches attempt to break down the divide between the individual body and collectivity traditionally inscribed in scholarship in which the social sciences and phenomenology converge, and which eventually became so limiting for discussing the epistemological value of experience in the conformation of social memory and history.

Oral memories of the early carpas shows as told by participants in the first stage (1890-1930) are mostly lost to the archive. The few traces of oral histories that remain from participant actors and audience members of the carpas shows pertain to a later stage, between 1930 and the 1950s. During this second stage, the carpas shows were very different in nature from the ones I described in the past chapters. Because these testimonies were collected retrospectively (in the 1980s) a nostalgic perspective permeates most of them. In lamenting the disappearance of these theaters, these narrators of the carpas’ history placed particular emphasis on the poorness of these shows.

The absence of testimonies of the first period in the archives as well as in collected oral histories make the study of such omission interesting in itself. Understanding omission as a form of remembrance, I inquire how it, as well as surviving remembrances of the carpas as a social practice, were respectively engendered. Existing testimonies and narrations from audience members of the carpas suggest that these people’s experiences at the musical-theater shows became intrinsically intertwined with experiences of the inhabited urban space and with a collective identification as “the

---

486 Scholars from various disciplines represent this strain of phenomenological inquiry labeled ‘sensuous scholarship,” among which Paul Ricoeur (philosophy), Paul Connerton (social anthropology), Nadia Serematakis, (cultural anthropology), Ya Fu Tan (Eastern philosophy) can be mentioned. In recent years, the development of social theory has increasingly reevaluated the importance of the body, not simply in conformations of individual identity, but more generally on the analysis of class, culture and consumption. See for example Byran S. Turner, “Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body,” in Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth and Bryan S. Turner eds. The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory (San Francisco: Sage, 1991), 1-36. Furthermore, recent studies on the nexus between physicality of the urban space and embodied social memories have advanced interpretations on the emergence of feelings of cultural and territorial attachment. See for example, Mirko Zardini ed., Sense of the City: An Alternate Approach to Urbanism (Montréal, QC: Canadian Centre for Architecture/Centre canadien d’architecture, 2005); Monica Montserrat Degen, Sensing Cities: Regenerating Public Life in Barcelona and Manchester (London; New York: Routledge, 2008); Alexander Cowan and Jill Steward eds., City and the Senses: urban culture since 1500 (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007).

poor.” I follow Paul Ricoeur’s view that there is no such thing as “bad” memory. Rather, even if abused by institutions, manipulated by interest or re-shaped by imagination, “we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that something has taken place […] before we declare we remember it.”\textsuperscript{488} Memory, first accounted as testimony, is therefore our only point of access to the past. I analyze the ways in which past events, imagination and narrativity are entangled to create the known history of the carpas. I claim that a very characteristic collective self had shaped itself in the downtown barrios of Mexico City where the carpas settled during the early twentieth century. Finally I defend that the modernization of the city not only displaced this form of theatrical musicality, but also annihilated such a particular way of elaborating a sense of socio-cultural identity and territorial belonging.

Presumably, during the early stage of the carpas shows (1890-1930), participants in this scene did not see these entertainment centers as spaces of social, cultural or political resistance, nor as sites where “the poor convened”, but rather, in the case of the company members, simply as an economic alternative, or in the case of audiences, as a thrifty choice for quality entertainment. The quotes with which I started this chapter illustrate that remembrance of attending the carpas spectacles eventually became a signifier of belonging to a certain social group: the Mexican working class. My intuition is that attendance at the carpas shows and “poorness” became correlated because of the social stigma that started to be attached to the carpas themselves.

**Cultural Geography and Materiality of Space: The Barrio**

In chapter two I illustrated the ways in which the carpas shows were connected to specific *barrios* in the downtown area, and discussed some of the reasons for this. I have also explained that the *barrios* were frequently identified as the niche of the carpas shows, and were thus discursively

used to reinforce the social stigma of poverty. These geographic spaces, imagined and physical at the same time, provided the material environment to sustain the social relations of the carpas’ community, while also fostering a gamut of embodied experiences.

Initially used as a term to denote only a geographic area, the concept of barrio has become a heuristic and historical category especially used by scholars interested in the entanglements between space, experience and identity construction. While the English term “neighborhood”, conceives of a specific geographic area as a place that functionally hosts a set of social networks, the Spanish term barrio conceives of the inhabited space in many other dimensions. These include seeing it as a material milieu, as a space that fosters a given sociability, as a shelter of traditions, as a unique site to promote a specific experiential sphere, or as the repository of a locally based micro-culture. Political geographer and urban planner Edward Soja theorized the “third space” as a locality that is simultaneously an experienced and an imagined space within big metropolitan areas. The barrio, by contrast, is said to be contained within a reduced physical site of smaller dimensions, and therefore propitious for fostering closer social relationships. Due to its holistic nature as space, place and social milieu, the barrio simultaneously incorporates the physicality of the material space, the social relationships of its dwellers, and the experiential aspects it fosters. Comparatively then, the term barrio has emphasized how the space is apprehensible to the senses, as well as in which ways it is culturally contingent. Because the people inhabiting a barrio cultivate distinct traditions, the barrio’s identity is grounded on lively and constant cultural transformation. And inasmuch as the barrio results from the social interactions between its inhabitants, it is both an experience and a social

---


practice. The construction of territorially based cultural identities around a given barrio is therefore something actively, collectively and consciously done by its dwellers.

Argentinean urban anthropologist Ariel Gravano has claimed that the barrio is axiomatically an indicator of social segregation. Gravano therefore treats the barrio as a space where low-income workers reside. Although his economic definition of barrios is somewhat problematic, it works fairly well in regard to Mexico City at the time of the carpas.

As I documented in chapter two, processes that we might nowadays call gentrification started to take place with Porfirian housing policies. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the area to the southwest of what then counted as Mexico City was being turned into modern neighborhoods for the wealthy who sought to escape the deterioration of the city’s center. The intention was to transform the area comprised between the Metropolitan Cathedral and the Avenue San Juan de Letrán (to the East of the Zócalo) into a civic, business-oriented and touristic space. To follow this segregationist plan, a number of modern colonias (a term that already distinguished these neighborhoods from the barrios) were erected, including Colonia Roma, Colonia Juárez, Colonia Santa María la Ribera and Colonia San Rafael. By contrast, the areas located to the northeast of the central square, historically inhabited by indigenous Mexicans, were left unattended by urban planners. This included the barrios Tepito, Peralvillo, and La Lagunilla. Similarly, the

---


492 Gravano’s theory has a historical basis in English and French theories of the neighborhood and the quartier respectively, both of which share a firm Marxist basis. Furthermore, to build his theory, Gravano’s predominantly considers cities in Europe and North America as reference cases and where social stratification obeyed different causes than those in colonial and postcolonial Hispanic America. Even if he takes into account the cases of some Latin American cities, (such as Buenos Aires) he does not discuss how the preexisting casta system of the colonial period may have determined the social distribution of space in contemporary times. For a contrasting example of how the colonial history of certain cities may determine the stratification of its spaces, and consequently the subjectivities of its inhabitants see Rashmi Varma, *The Postcolonial City and Its Subjects: London, Nairobi, Bombay* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

493 The streets and houses in these areas were designed and built based on European architectural styles, especially in what are the current streets of Orizaba, Alvaro Obregón, Colima and Tonalá, where the older facades are best conserved even nowadays.
neighborhoods located to the southeast of the central square, where the barrios La Merced and La Candelaria are located, were not included in the modernizing plan. Meanwhile, Tlatelolco and Santa María la Redonda were developed around industrial sites, closer to the train terminal of Buenavista and to the oil refinery, thus also separating them from the touristic and business area.494

The impact of these urban developments on the carpas was firmly inscribed in the memories of some of their audience members. As Verónica Tapia explained, the barrio “depends on the perception of the community and of the uses and habits that that community generates […] it is not only a place of economic activity and human sociability, but also a place around which individual and group memories revolve.”495 Indeed, the testimonies of carpa actors and carpa goers reinforce ideas about how these small theaters emerged in the crevices of urbanization. Luis Ortega, for instance, recalls that “some of the carpas that later became very famous, started with canvas tents and walls made with wood boards from nearby demolition sites.”496 Their narrations connect the barrios to streets and squares as well as to the people that used them.

The barrio [that hosted many carpas] was long, and it expanded to the North up to the streets of Meave, Echeveste, Jiménez and the San Ignacio alley (where there were also women of easy virtue); San Ignacio by the side of the School of girls and the Vizcaínas Convent, because the other side was full of carpentry and lathe workshops.497

By many accounts, the physicality of the central neighborhoods is closely connected to the experience of attending the carpas shows and, in some cases, with the identity of the narrating subjects. In a corpus of thirteen retrospective interviews carried out by theatre historian Socorro

494 For further reference on this geographic distribution see Annotated Map 1, dated 1926 in the Appendix.

495 “El concepto de barrio depende de la percepción de la comunidad y de los usos y costumbres que dicha comunidad genera […] Es un lugar no sólo de actividad económica y de asociación humana, sino también un lugar en el que se centran los recuerdos, tanto individuales como de grupo.” Tapia, “El concepto de barrio.”

496 “algunas carpas que fueron famosas, empezaron con toldo de lona y muros hechos con tablas procedentes de las demoliciones.” Luis Ortega, in Granados, Carpas de México, 14.

497 “El barrio [donde había carpas] tenía una falda muy amplia, al norte las calles de Meave, Echeveste, Jiménez y el callejón de San Ignacio (donde también había mujeres de la vida) San Ignacio al costado de la Escuela de Niñas y de las Vizcaínas, ya que el otro costado era de carpinteros y tornerías.” Granados, Carpas de México, 22.
Merlín in the late 1980s, five of the interviewed actors – almost forty percent of them – described the exact streets and neighborhoods in downtown where they were born and how these places were connected to the carpas. This suggests first that these actors saw their place of birth and childhood as part of their identity, and secondly, that such information was relevant when giving an account of the carpas history. In either case, memory, narration and experience of the space intertwine. When talking about the nexus between space, memory, and narrative, Paul Ricoeur asserts,

The act of inhabiting constitutes in this respect the strongest human tie between the date and the place. Places inhabited are memorable par excellence. Declarative memory enjoys evoking them and recounting them, so attached to them is memory. As for our movements, the successive places we have passed through serve as reminders of the episodes that have taken place there. They appear to us after the fact as hospitable or inhospitable, in a word, as habitable.

It is notable that the responses to Merlín’s interviews that connect life stories with central barrios all came from men (Roberto Montúfar Sánchez, Roberto Chávez, Salvador Gómez Estrella, Rafael Solana, Adalberto Martínez “Resortes”), while none of the women interviewed made such associations. This, in my view, hints at the possibility that men’s access to and appropriation of urban spaces, especially at night, was more socially accepted than women’s during those years, thus causing different gender-based ways to connect affectively with inhabited space. The existence of “theaters for men only,” or jacalones also called “tolerance carpas”, is a case in point. And although the participation of women in public life had been on the rise since the start of the century, Merlín’s interviews suggest that female members of the carpas audiences were not as assured about

---

498 Merlín, *Vida y milagros*, Testimony section.
500 Judith. N. Desena has commented on the little engagement that urban sociology has had with the issue of women’s use of urban space and/or about their impact in localized community life. As she argued, with data mainly gathered from men, the effect of women in transforming the neighborhood’s space has been hard to assess. See Judith. N. Desena, “Gendered space and women’s community work,” in *Research in Urban Sociology*, Volume 5 (1999): 275 – 297.
501 See chapter two.
their power to use and transform urban spaces as were their male counterparts. This in turn would lead to different affective connections to the neighborhood and to its leisure venues. It is possible that while men felt that certain barrios or nightly spaces existed for their legitimate use, women saw themselves as casual users who only occasionally visited places normally denied to them.

**Emotional Bonding With the Community and Attachment to the Urban Space**

The environment of friendship, camaraderie, and support generated around the carpas shows is an additional reason to believe they played a role in reinforcing a sense of community. The tight-knit social bonds these shows nurtured may thus explain the emergence of feelings of attachment to the city, as well as of allegiance to a given social class among its participants. Beyond material adversity and destitution—or maybe as a result of it—the symbolic importance that participants attributed to the carpas in generating a sense of community is crucial to understanding how notions of “poorness” became gradually but deeply ingrained within this community.

The hardships of the war during the decade of the 1910s may have also played a crucial role in reinforcing social bonding. By many accounts, the traumatic experiences of the war of Revolution were a turning point after which life in the city was never the same. This was not only an issue of perception: the horrid sight of hung bodies or corpses decomposing in public squares became common during the Ten Tragic Days of 1913, and recurred occasionally during the ten gruesome years of the armed struggle. Such practices also occurred during the Cristero War (1926-1929), as the corpses of dissident men appeared hanging from public lampposts or lying in public streets, to serve as deterrents for opponents of the President, Plutarco Elías Calles. On top of the horror of

---

502 I develop my explanation of tight-knit social bonds in chapter one.

503 The Ten Tragic Days was a series of violent events—which included mortal battles in the streets—during February 1913 that led to a coup d’état and the assassination of president Francisco I. Madero.
such sightings, the problem of abandoned bodies near rivers and water sources was also a sanitary concern that greatly preoccupied the Ayuntamiento office. In light of such events, it was only reasonable that the sensibilities of Mexican capitalinos were deeply impacted.

Because the music at the carpas was so connected to the emotional response of the audiences, the constant mention of carpas shows as an element of social reconciliation and emotional healing during these turbulent years does not come as a surprise. As late as 1990, Antonio Cortéz “Bobito”, a former actor active during the carpas’ second period (1930-1950), recounts what he believes to be the origins of the carpas, and interprets them as curative instruments for the anguish experienced during the war.

People say that the origins of the carpas date back to the beginning of the century with the arrival of the Circo Orrín […] And during the [P]orfirian years, the most outstanding [people] of society would gather for their favorite celebrations. When the city was at peace after the Revolution, carpas and vacant lots where people amused them selves emerged, because it seemed as if everybody wanted to sing, to dance and to laugh to forget the sorrows suffered during the armed conflict. While Antonio Cortéz may have not experienced the Revolution or the early carpas shows himself, it is possible that at the moment of this interview the imaginary of the carpas shows was already well established in the carpas’ second generation. Seemingly, then, this second generation had adopted and reproduced the myths of origin of these theaters.

The frequency with which the testimonies of the carpas gathered by Socorro Merlín in the 1990s closely resemble Pedro Granados’ Las carpas de México, published in 1984, suggests that his book served as a cornerstone on which the imaginary of the carpas was grounded from then on.
Granados’ recollection of the dramatic events of the Revolution is distinctive and recurrent throughout his book.

The barrio [whose axis was] the street San Juan de Letrán, undergo physiognomic changes. With the Revolution, it [the barrio] turns into a bloody theater because in its streets and squares, battles were fought; hundreds of corpses were collected in carts; the flies, the blood and the putrefaction were a horrendous feast [...] The carpas were tacitly a social phenomenon and, at the same time, the daughters of the Revolution. The people [el pueblo] sick of blood, slaughter and misery, not having a place in which to express themselves, flocked to the square to sing their love corridos. [...] The Mexican people [el pueblo de México] were back from the fratricidal war. Yearning for amusement, they wanted to hear their music, their jokes. The carpa was the campaign tent the limelight, the bonfire of the bivouac in nascent times of peace. The people [pueblo] materially rushed to the carpas, and there, their first idols, the carperos, were born. [...] The carpas were the refuge of those of us who had nothing but the twenty cents. 506

Granados’ appraisal of the carpas as an instrument for social reconciliation as well as a remedy for trauma discloses an affective dimension of the carpas, something that accounts from inspectors, officers or intellectuals never considered. Granados’ choice of words merits closer attention. First, he begins this section by saying that the barrio had converted itself into a “bloody theater”, (un teatro sangriento) the old trope of “the theater of war.” By comparing the carpas with a “campaign tent” (casa de campaña) and a “bivouac” (vivac), he vividly evokes images of the improvised campsites of combatants during times of war. Likewise, the use of the word “bonfire” (hoguera) conveys and recreates his embodied memory of the warmth and safety he may have felt at the carpas. Symptomatically, these turns of phrase are evocative of the angst experienced during the armed phase of the Revolution and reveal the role Granados assigned to the carpas, their music, and especially the act of singing as soothing agents. Most characteristically, in Granados’ memory, the

506 “El barrio y la calle San Juan de Letrán sufren cambios de fisonomía. Con la Revolución se convierte en teatro sangriento, ya que en sus calles y plazuelas se libraron batallas, cientos de cadáveres eran recogidos en carretones, la sangre, la podredumbre y las moscas eran un festín de horror. [...] Las carpas tácitamente fueron un fenómeno social y al mismo tiempo, hijas de la Revolución. El pueblo, harto de sangre, matanza y miseria, al no tener dónde explayarse se lanza a la plazuela a cantar sus corridos de amor [...] El pueblo de México estaba de vuelta de la lucha fratricida. Ávido de diversión, quería escuchar su música sus chistes. La carpa fue la tienda de campaña y las candilejas, la hoguera del vivac en la naciente paz. Entonces el pueblo se lanzó materialmente a las carpas y ahí nacieron sus primeros ídolos, los carperos. [...] Las carpas [fueron] refugio de quienes no teníamos más que los veinte centavos.” Granados, 25, 53, 60-61, 100.
carpas were a protective site, a “refuge” for those in a disadvantageous economic position who “had nothing but the twenty cents.”

Granados’ narrative style is characteristically full of pathos. When debating the phenomenological aspects of memory, Paul Ricouer makes a distinction between “remembrance” and “evocation.” As Ricouer explains it, while the former entails a “search” for the things past, the latter is an affective form of recollection that emerges spontaneously. It therefore bears the imprints of embodied, first-person experience, and as a narrative modality, seeks to convey the traces of that experience.507 Granados himself explained his narrative style through a disclaimer about historic accuracy: “We will not, tell our story chronologically; rather, it will be an emotional narrative emerging at the moment, truth dictated from the heart and not from statistics.”508 Symptomatically too, he talks in the plural form integrating his readers and himself into the same community of experiencing subjects.

Embodied Memories

In recent years a group of scholars has convincingly argued that acts of remembering are not only embodied, but also emplaced.509 Exploring how memory and narrative are inherently connected

507 Paul Ricoeur, Memory History and Forgetting, 27.

508 “No haremos el relato en forma cronológica, sino más bien será una narración emocionada del momento, verdad que dicta el corazón y no la estadística.” Italics are mine. Granados, Carpas de México, 52.

509 For example, when talking about the transition from corporeal memory to the memory of places, Paul Ricoeur claims that this process “is assured by acts as important as orienting one self, moving from place to place, and above all inhabiting. It is on the surface of the inhabitable earth that we remember having traveled and traveled memorable sites. In this way the "things" remembered are intrinsically associated with places. […] it is indeed at this primordial level that the phenomenon of "memory places" is constituted, before they become a reference for historical knowledge” Ricoeur, 41. On his part, Henri Lefebvre defended that space is both the “basis of action” (i.e. “places whence energies are derived and whither energies are directed”) and a “field for action” (the mobile spatial field of an actor, a field centered in the situated body with its immediate tactile reach, and extending into vocal scope, acoustic range and visual horizon.” Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford, OX, UK; Cambridge, Mass., USA: Blackwell, 1991),191. Both Paul Connerton and Nadia Serematakis claim that space provides the sensorial stimuli that conform the building bricks for social memories. Paul Connerton, Op. Cit. and Nadia Serematakis, “The Memory of the Senses, Part I: Marks of the
to space, Paul Connerton has argued that, “there is a type of experience recognizable only to those
who have walked through a particular building, street or district. Only they have lived it.”
Significantly, all the first part of Granados’ testimony consists not of a description of the carpas
shows themselves, but instead of the street San Juan de Letrán – currently known as Eje Central
Lázaro Cárdenas -- and of the Barrio Latino, where many of these informal theaters were located,
and which no longer exists today. Granados’ narrative provides abundant references of street and
plazas’ names, and it is also prodigal in multi-sensorial and synesthetic references inspired by the
surrounding environment.

The mention of the calle San Juan de Letrán and a myriad of other places as centers of social
activity reveal Granados’ connection to geographic space. As Connerton sustains, these names are
references to the “loci” that act as sites of cultural memories and whose names can be understood as
symbols that trigger all sorts of affective associations. In these retrospective narratives,
remembrance of the early carpas is firmly grounded in the realms of ordinary spaces such as bars,
restaurants, coffee shops and hotels. Other sensations such as sounds, smells, the taste of the
sweets and drinks of those days, the physical proximity experienced inside a carpa, the dim light of
its petrol lamps, and other similar evocations, constitute Granados’ material for commemoration.


Connerton, How Modernity Forgets, 32.

Further to the north, the name of San Juan de Letrán street changes to “Santa Ma. La Redonda,” thus setting the
boundaries between this stigmatized Barrio Latino and the area of central downtown. In chapter two I have already
explained the significance that naming the streets had for inhabitants of Mexico City.

As I argued in chapter two, not only the city’s street plan, but even the names of the street had changed constantly
since year 1900, thus disorienting the citizens who tried to bond with their inhabited space. In this respect, Paul
Connerton argues that place-names indicate a form of memorializing: “toponyms are mnemonics, highly charged
linguistic symbols. […] place-names summon up an immense range of associations, about history, about events, about
persons, about social activities; an historical narratives are given precision when they are organized spatially.” Paul
Addressing all these impressions, anthropologist Nadia Serematakis has coined the term “sensory landscape” to refer to the collection of sensory stimuli provided by a given material milieu. In her view, the sensorial possibilities offered by a given locale form the raw materials for collective cultural memories. The senses are “meaning generating apparatuses” that often work beyond the conscious level, prompting unintentional reactions among perceivers, who inherently interpret their surroundings while simultaneously imbuing them with cultural meanings. Concerning the intrinsic connections between the material environment, the sensorial experience, and cultural memory, Serematakis explains: “The sensory landscape and its meaning-endowed objects bear within them emotional and historical sedimentation that can provoke and ignite gestures, discourses and acts – acts which open up these objects’ stratigraphy. Thus the surround of material culture is neither stable nor fixed, but inherently transitive, demanding connection and completion by the perceiver.”

Because the capacity to perceive any given material environment directly depends on access to and conditions of use of that environment, the memory of space would be inscribed with the integration or exclusion the perceiver experiences. As I explained before, the project of urban modernization in Mexico City bypassed certain areas, causing their marginalization. Furthermore, fetishistic attention to architecture among the governing classes also caused hostility against non-elite people who used public buildings and spaces that authorities considered “colonial treasures.” Social resentment against such segregationist measures polarized the population even more.

The Barrio de Tepito was one of the neighborhoods most visibly affected by the reformist urban plans. When revamping downtown at the turn of the century, Miguel Ángel de Quevedo, director of urban planning, decided to move all the street markets in the central area to the Plazuela de San Francisco in Tepito, a barrio characterized since pre-Columbian times by the various tianguis.

---

(open air markets) around the parish church. As a result, even as late as the 1960s, urban planners and chroniclers essentially considered this and similarly disregarded areas as poor barrios. This perception then helped convert these sites into romantic emblems of class and authenticity.\(^{514}\)

The deteriorated state of old buildings in Tepito, dating from as far back as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, stands even today as part of the visual identity of this barrio. Similarly, big public spaces or vecindades with communal patios and open-air laundries, are still some of its distinctive features. As some sociologists have argued, it may have been precisely the physiognomy of these northern barrios that fostered the development of strong community bonds.\(^{515}\) As can be inferred, these neighborhoods were ghettoized by their systematic exclusion from modernization as well as by the symbolic violence they were subjected to in the writings of journalists and officers. Paradoxically, but not so surprisingly, it may have been such seclusion that favored the preservation of their traditional cultural profile. Similarly, the destitution of these neighborhoods, evident by the years 1920s, made them a suitable shelter for the carpas theaters, especially for those whose musical repertoires were objectionable.

---

\(^{514}\) Ernesto Aréchiga Córdova has engaged with the role that the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda or intellectuals such as Oscar Lewis played in the ghettoization of these barrios. Ernesto Aréchiga Córdova, “No es lo mismo vecindad que tugurio, vivencia versus discurso oficial en la ciudad de México de mediados del siglo XX,” paper presented in the Conference *La otra ciudad*, September 2006 at the Centro Cultural "Casa Talavera", UACM. Web. [Retrieved September 23, 2014].

\(^{515}\) Numerous sociological studies have addressed the relationship between the physiognomy of Tepito, its visual culture and the emergence of strong community bonds. See for example, Silvano Héctor Rosales Ayala, *Tepito Arte Acá: Ensayo de interpretación de una práctica cultural en el barrio más chido de la Ciudad de México* (México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Centro Regional de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias, 1987); Daniel Manrique, *Tepito Arte Acá.* (Nezahualcóyotl, Estado de México: Grupo Cultural Ente, 1998); Casco J. Ceballos, *Casco: el orgullo de Tepito* (México: Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes, 2004).
Listening

The visual component of these central barrios is not the only sensory register with symbolic significance for constructions of social class. Because authorities thought there was nothing worth protecting in these destitute barrios, the production of noise was not as big a concern as it had been for the downtown central area. Memories of the sound in and around the carpas, including their music, suggest that they were an important component of the city’s soundscape.

Likewise, sonic remembrances also suggest how these shows may have assisted elaboration of ideas of locality. As Granados narrates:

> The yelling of street vendors was of a character as special as the one we hear today in small-town markets, with their plaintive cries [carpas settled] which filled the neighborhood with happiness […] the music, with its trumpets and timpani, the songs and the tangos, and the peals of laughter, accompanied by loud applause, made an environment so extraordinary that one yearns for it.\(^{516}\)

Audio-visual references to the sonic world around the carpas are perhaps the most evocative sensorial references to these theaters and their surrounding environment. Granados is prodigal with this type of description.

> In front of the carpas, before starting the show, musicians with very strident trumpets and timpani would get the people’s attention, announcing: Here! come see the Conde Bobby!, or Celia Tejeda, or the great Eva Peralta, for only ten cents! Only if you are broke you won’t get inside to see them! “This [tanda] and next one for a single ticket.”\(^{517}\)

Many other subjects reported similar memories concerning the gritones (lit., yellers; or carny barkers) that lured passersby inside the carpas. The well-known call, “This [tanda] and the next one for a single ticket” (“Esta y l’otra por un sólo boleto”), was recited by one or more men holding a megaphone

\(^{516}\) “La gritería de la vendimia era de una fisonomía tan especial como la que escuchamos actualmente en los mercados de los pueblos, con sus plañideras voces.” [Se instalaron carpas] que llenaron de alegría todo el barrio. […] la música con sus trompetas y timbaleros, las canciones y los tangos, y las carcajadas, acompañados de los fuertes aplausos, formaban un ambiente tan extraordinario que se añora.” Granados, Carpas de México, 22-23, 38.

\(^{517}\) “Al frente de las carpas, antes de comenzar la función, se ponían los músicos, trompetas y timbales muy estridentes para llamar la atención del público y tres o cuatro gritones anunciaban: ¡Aquí pasen a ver al Conde Bobby o a Celia Tejeda, o bien a la gran Eva Peralta por solo diez centavos! ¡Solo estando muy lámparas no pasarán a verlos! “Esta y l’otra por un sólo boleto.” Granados, Carpas de México, 55.
at the carpa entrance. This enticing cry is one of the most consistent aural memories of the carpas, one that has been preserved in Mexico’s popular culture in inscriptions of varied natures, including visual ones. For instance, a caricature of this urban character was published in the urban chronicles of Leopoldo Ramírez Cárdenas in 1970 (Fig. 5.1). Recalled and reproduced as a visual remnant of a long-gone sonic past, the image of the gritón de carpas got instilled into the retrospective social imaginaries of these urban shows. Similarly, the photograph shown in Fig. 5.2 shows a real life gritón receiving one audience member’s payment to see the tiple Celia Tejeda. (She is also mentioned in Granados’ account, quoted above, from which we can deduce the photo was taken during the second period of the carpas).

Adding to this collection of memories, this treasured call “Esta y l’otra…” was also emulated in a retrospective radio program recoded in 1980s, when the carpas had already disappeared. (Sound example No. 3 in Supplementary materials section.519)

Figure 5.1. Gritón de Carpas. Cartoon by Miguel Patiño Solórzano (1970).520

518 See Leopoldo Ramírez Cárdenas, “Esta y la otra…” in Mexico Viñetas de Ayer, 22-23.
519 “Carpas de Barriada”, Tiempo de Recordar No.5, (7’ 23”-7’39”), Instituto Mexicano de la Radio, [Currently hosted at the Fonoteca Nacional. (FN08010119177)].
520 “Gritón de Carpas” in Ramírez Cárdenas México: viñetas de ayer, 23.
In many cases, memories of the central neighborhoods are intrinsically linked to the soundscape evoked by the titles and lyrics of songs performed in the carpas. Pedro Granados, again, connects these songs to the emotional constitution of those whom he calls *el pueblo*:

In all the carpas, the tango was something irreplaceable. It was at its apex [...] There was always a tango singer who would make us cry with the ‘Pebeta’, ‘Caballo criollo’, a gaucho betrayed by his best friend [...] those tearful lyrics caused the flourishing of ‘Aztec Pebetas’ and ‘Totonaca payadores’ in the dance halls. [...] Whenever we would walk in front of a carpa in any of Mexico’s neighborhoods we would always hear ‘Por qué me abandonas mi lindo Julián? [Why do you abandon me, beautiful Julian?]… ‘Mocosita no me hagas más sufrir…’ [Little girl, don’t make me cry] or ‘Negro, quiero adorarte así toda la vida’ [Negro, I want to adore you like this all my life] or ‘Zapatito pinturero de charol…’ [Little painted patent lather shoe] or ‘Ladrillo está en la cárcel’ [Ladrillo is in jail]… The people made these tragedies their own and cried with their favorite tango singer. 

The history of the tango and its connection to the life of the *barrio* contains almost as much myth as truth. Numerous specialists in Latin American popular musics have debated various theories about

---


522 “En todas las carpas el tango se convertía en algo insustituible. Estaba en pleno auge. […]Nunca falta la tanguista que nos haga llorar con la ‘Pebeta,’ ‘Caballo Criollo,’ un gaucho traicionado por su mejor amigo, etcétera… Esas letras lloronas hicieron florecer en los salones de baile a las ‘pebetas aztecas’ y a los ‘payadores totonacas.’ Cuando pasábamos frente a una carpa de cualquier barrio de México se escuchaba siempre ‘Por qué me abandonas mi lindo Julián?’… ‘Mocosita no me hagas más sufrir…’ o ‘Negro, quiero adorarte así toda la vida,’ o ‘Zapatito pinturero de charol…’ o ‘Ladrillo está en la cárcel…’. El pueblo hacía suya la tragedia y lloraba junto con su tanguista consentido.” Granados, *Carpas de México*, 82-83.
the origins of the tango, while also debating the historiographic implications of existing narratives of this genre. The topics under debate include, the African origins of the tango, the musical activities of black Argentineans, the development of the tango Americano as opposed to the Spanish and Andalucian tangos, as well as the tango’s connections with the milonga, and candombe, both dances with clearer connections with African cultures. None of these controversies have been resolved. There is however, some agreement in considering that the musical and dance practices that became to be known as “tango,” consolidated during the nineteenth century, and that between 1890 and 1920 the genre was already established.

The development of the tango rioplatense, from the region of Río de la Plata in Uruguay and Argentina, is credited to the influence of genres such as the tango Americano (a cannibalized American version of the Andalusian tango), the habanera (originated in the European contradanza that came to the Americas with French and Spanish settlers), and the milonga (a music-and-dance genre from Uruguay and Argentinean associated with the popular classes. This dance has no ballroom version). The milonga was spread through género chico in South America, and through circus traditions of payadores who used it as the musical accompaniment in their recitations. The milonga is also thought to have contributed two distinctive dance movements called “el corte” and “la quebrada,” in which a single dancer had to stop abruptly –the corte – and then bend – quebrar – his body. These two movements were considered inelegant according to dominant ideas of the dancing body. The two moves were later incorporated into a couple dance in which, to support the simultaneous bending of their bodies, the dancers held one another firmly and closely. They became the most distinctive features of the tango’s choreography. This physical proximity too, was counter to dominant ideas of respectable dance, Between 1890 and 1910, the tango was described by the

---

local press of Buenos Aires and Montevideo as being “lewd” and “libertine,” and connected with brothels and sordid dancing venues of the district of Palermo, an element that contributed to its stigmatization. By the 1920s, the tango of Buenos Aires and Montevideo was closely associated with the “low classes,” an association that may in turn have influenced its appeal to Mexican audiences at the carpas.

The early tango songs were often narrated in first person and their lyrics included joyful anecdotes describing the great deeds of their protagonists. However, from 1920 to 1935—a period called “the New Guard”—the tango underwent an intense and rapid process of development, in which “it matured as a form and distinct stylistic and interpretive schools emerged.”

During this period, the lyrics of the tango began to mutate into dramatic stories, told in the first or the third person, narrating the profound lamentations of their characters.

The lyrical fragments of the tangos mentioned by Granados, provide a window into the emotional lives of those who listened to them. Composed in the late 1920s, these songs were most likely dispersed throughout Latin America thanks to both scores published by Argentinean houses as well as to early sound records. The enthusiastic reception that these emotive tangos had in Mexico suggests the possibility of a collective need for emotional catharsis after the Revolution. Recalled by Granados as “tearful” (lloronas), the lyrics of these songs may have helped to channel grief. This is especially understandable if one considers that personal loss, betrayals, disillusionment, passionate impulses and imprisonment—some of the most typical topics of these songs—were part of everyday life during the years of the Mexican armed struggle.

In the tango “Ladrillo,” for instance, we hear the tragic story of a man nicknamed Ladrillo and who, recently engaged, is forced to defend his fiancé’s honor in the face of her harassment by another man. After having stabbed his rival in a duel, Ladrillo is imprisoned, causing bitter sorrow to

524 Idem, 829.
his old mother and to the kids of the barrio, who miss him sorely. Perhaps this story was not so disconnected to the many cases of political incarceration during the years of the Cristero war.

El barrio lo extraña
sus dulces serenatas
ya no se oyen más
los chicos ya no tienen
su amigo querido
que siempre moneditas
les daba al pasar
The barrio misses him
His sweet serenades
Are no longer heard
The boys don’t see
their dear friend
Who always handed them
Some coins as he passed by

If the reference to the life in the barrio in “Ladrillo” may stand as a sign of the connection between the stories of Mexico City and Buenos Aires, other tangos may have resonated among Mexican listeners thanks to the social changes the two cities were undergoing at the time. “Attenti Pebeta!” (Careful, babe!), for example, is an affectionate piece of advice given by a more experienced fellow (un viejo zorro) to a young girl who is presumably a visitor to the city’s center, and who most likely comes from the countryside. Maintaining close similarities with Rodimini’s mockery in “Un circo de barrio” (see chapter 4), the narrator of this song warns the girl against rich men and playboys while in the city. Written in lunfardo— the local slang of Buenos Aires -- this tango recommends that this imaginary girl, the Pebeta, protect herself by playing dumb and tricking men into believing she is naïve, which really gives her control over her actions.

Cuando vengas para el centro,
caminá junando el suelo,
arrastrando los fangullos
y arrimada a la pared,
como si ya no tuvieras
ilusiones ni consuelo,
pues, si no, dicen los giles
que te has echado a perder.

Si ves unos guantes patito, ¡rajales!;
a un par de polainas, ¡rajales también!
A esos sobretodos con catorce ojales
no les des bolilla, porque te perdés;
A esos bigotitos de catorce líneas
que en vez de bigote son un espinel…
¡Atenti, pebeta, seguí mi consejo:
yo soy zorro viejo y te quiero bien.
I’m an old fox and I wish you well.

Resemblances between the Argentinean And Mexican societies may have given Granados the perfect excuse to fuse their imaginaries into the term “Aztec pebetas.”

The tango “Caballo Criollo,” the only one of these songs by a Mexican composer, is an interesting case of political commentary. Inspired by the imaginary of the South American pampas, it alludes directly to the armed conflict that Nicaragua underwent to fight territorial occupation by the United States (1927-1933). If only subtextually, this tango also entails close connections with Mexican politics.

Caballo criollo, corre veloz
lleva a la gloria mi corazón
pero no vuelvas nunca sin él,
caballo criollo, muere tú también.

Criollo horse, run fast
Bring glory to my heart
Don’t ever come back without him
Criollo horse, die as well

Esperando a tu pampero,
sola, una tarde de mayo
te trajeron su caballo
que muy triste te miró
parece que te decía
de sus ojitos el brillo
"él se murió por Sandino
allá en Nicaragua,
que quieren libertad.”

Waiting for your cowboy,
Lonely, on a May afternoon,
They brought you his horse
Which looked at you very sadly
It seemed as if the brightness
In its eyes were saying
“He died for Sandino,
over there in Nicaragua
where people want freedom.”

Fernando Ramírez Aguilar (1897-1953), who wrote under the pseudonym Jacobo Dalevuelta, is the author of the lyrics of this tango. He was a journalist at the newspaper El Imparcial and a war correspondent during the years of the Mexican Revolution. Meanwhile, Antonio Guzman Aguilera, (also known as Guz Águila) is the composer of the tango’s music. He was also a theater critic and a writer of revista scripts and music. While there is nothing directly alluding to the Mexican Revolution in the lyrics, the sympathies expressed for the Nicaraguan revolutionary

Augusto Cesar Sandino (1895-1934) seem to establish a tacit but nonetheless powerful parallelism between the two liberationist projects.\textsuperscript{526}

Although Granados discusses how these tangos transited to the dancing halls that were so popular in the 1940s and 1950s, his account does not provide any information concerning the dancing of these tangos by performers of the carpas companies or by audience members. Space in the carpas was tight, the dance was new to Mexico, and oral accounts do not mention anything about the audience participating in the dancing, so it is highly likely that tangos were danced only by performers on stage. Because these were the years when the choreographic conventions of the tango had just become fixed, presumably carpa performers danced to them either as choreographic demonstration, or in cases as parodies in comedy acts.\textsuperscript{527}

\textit{Touch}

The physical proximity (proxemics) and constant touching of bodies (haptics) that carpa audiences must have experienced may also have played a role in permitting them to internalize a sense of community belonging. That people inside the carpas were close to one another is easily inferred, due to the small size of each carpa where little personal space was available. It is also possible that the increasingly overcrowded condition of the city conditioned greater tolerance for interpersonal contact and physical touch. These are factors that may have increased the sense of

\textsuperscript{526} The time Sandino spent in Mexico included the years when the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution was coming to an end, as well as a period of political exile in Mérida and Mexico City in the late 1920s. During his first stay in Mexico, Sandino worked for an oil company in the port of Tampico, where he embraced the anti-clericalism of Mexico’s Revolution and the ideology of indigenismo, which glorified the Indian heritage of Latin American cultures. Between years 1929-1930 Sandino was offered political asylum in Mexico, but his radical ideas were not welcomed in the political climate of the Maximato (1928-1934). One can infer that Sandino’s radical figure may have refreshed the memories of the Mexican Revolutionary leader Emiliano Zapata, assassinated by Carranza’s troops in 1919. This may have been the reason why the government of Emilio Portes Gil prohibited this tango, which had been recorded in 1929 by Juan Pulido. Carpa performers however, seem to not have abided by the prohibition.

\textsuperscript{527} One such scene is shown in the movie \textit{Ágila y Sol}, starring Mario Moreno “Cantinflas.” This movie, about which I elaborate further on, recreates a carpas show in which two male comedians dance clumsily to a tango song.
familiar intimacy among audience members at the carpas.\textsuperscript{528} As Granados’ narrative imaginatively relates: “By asking permission and being elbowed, we approach the wooden banister that barely defends the musicians in the orchestra from being run over by the numerous audience members. The salon is always full to the brim!”\textsuperscript{529} This fragment of corporal memory leads the historian to wonder about the smells, the heat, and the overall physical experience of being inside the carpas in the hottest months of the year. Furthermore, simultaneous consideration of embodied memories and material deprivation may help historians to inquire into the internalized feelings of the social stigma and marginalization associated with the poor.

In an article entitled “How Bodies Remember,” Arthur and Joan Kleinman propose to explore how cultural memories are inscribed in the bodies of those who remember, particularly in the face of traumatic events. Intrigued by the traumatic experience of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the authors raise questions such as “how socio-somatic processes shape the experience of the body in its social contexts?,” “how do political processes of terror (and resistance) cross over from public space to traumatize or reanimate inner space and then cross back as collective experience?,” or “how does the societal disorientation caused by a crisis of cultural delegitimation become a bodily experience?”\textsuperscript{530} Kleinman and Kleinman conclude that,

\textsuperscript{528} In his Handbook for Proxemics Research, Edward T. Hall, distinguishes between different kinds of interpersonal distances and different “phases” or circumstances, in which physical proximity may reduce. As he characterizes them a “personal distance” is typical of interactions among good friends or family members. The 	extit{close phase} would occur at a distance of 1.5 to 2.5 feet (46 to 76 cm), while the 	extit{far phase} – comprises a distance ranging between 2.5 to 4 feet (76 to 122 cm). Meanwhile, an “intimate distance”, would be at play in cases of embracing, touching or whispering. These distances would range between 6 to 18 inches (15 to 46 cm) for the far phase, to less than 6 inches (15 cm) for the close phase. Edward T. Hall, Handbook for Proxemics Research (Washington : Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication, 1974), 41-62.

\textsuperscript{529} “A base de pedir con permisos y recibir codazos, llegamos hasta el barandal de madera que apenas defiende a los músicos de la orquesta de ser aplastados por el numeroso público! Siempre está el salón hasta los topes!” Granados, Carpas de México, 62.

Because in the local setting some things are always vitally at stake -- power, position, prestige, survival -- what is at stake orients persons to the local world; it gives social experience its local valency. So joined, social rhythms resonate with (and indeed are interconnected with) psychobiological rhythms. We can talk about the socio-somatic processes of everyday life, through which social relations affect (and are affected by) blood pressure, heart rate, and respiration, and social loss and demoralization contribute to illness and disease. Experience is not limited to the isolated person but it is shared across persons and even classes of persons. In this sense, social experience is intrinsically moral. […] Bodies and selves are axes in the social flow around which social psychological and socio-somatic processes aggregate. These processes transport metaphor from symbol system via event to relationships; they bring meaning into the body-self. Subjective complaint and collective complaint thereby merge, and social reaction and personal reaction unite. So defined, social experience interrelates social suffering and subjective suffering not as different entities but as interactive process.  

These everyday psychobiological rhythms and socio-somatic processes would have resonated deeply with the traumatic experience of collective bodies during the Mexican Revolution Kleinman and Kleinman's model allows me to consider the affective bonds that assisted psychosomatic community building during this period.

In chapter three, I offered an interpretation of how the candid dancing of a rumba by a lone man could have channeled suppressed collective desires, thus helping to vicariously fulfill them. I suggested too that the embodied experience of collectively listening to live dance music could have made people entrain a coordinated rhythm, thus time-locking their behavior across different sensory modalities. This would have in turn induced the feeling, even if ephemeral, of an acoustic and movement-based community. Once this non-verbal and primarily physical feeling of a gregarious body was induced, one can see how processes of identification on the grounds of social class started to take place.

In the passage quoted above, I have added emphasis to the ideas that go beyond individual experience and explore socialized ways of experiencing and remembering: In particular, I want to focus on the ways that social delegitimization could have led to reinforcement of the inner social ties among the carpas community. By segregating the carpas shows and attempting to limit access to the central downtown area, the city’s authorities induced different ways of experiencing the city among people.

---

531 Idem, 712.
those they saw as a different class of citizens. In the long run this could have had an impact on subjectivity formations. The continuous and systematic violence inflicted through discourses, material regulations, and de facto displacement (restricted movement), may have caused members of these marginalized cultures not only to internalize demeaning representations of themselves, but eventually to construct the carpas as emblems of a space that welcomed them as much as it protected them.

As I argued in chapter one, tightly-knit social bonds encouraged a sort of protective shield against an aggressive social environment. I developed this argument after Mark Granovetter, who has argued that, while strong social bonds may provide a “protective core” against a perceived hostile world “outside” the group, perception of social roles within this group is prioritized over social roles in society at large. This will thus “prevent individuals from articulating their roles in relationship to the outside world.” Pedro Granados’ distinctive style clearly illustrates this point. In his text, celebration of the filth and poverty of the neighborhoods that hosted the carpas is most characteristic:

The Barrio Latino [and] all these barrios were the red district of the capital city. The ‘plebs’ mingled with the donkeys, which mated before the eyes of anybody who wanted to enjoy the show. It was the first pornography of the ‘raza’ [the race, the common people] The smell of manure was in those days the ‘smog’ of the capital city, and the gutters helped too, as well as the trash that rotted in the sun on the sidewalks, [whether of] mud or cobbled. […] The ‘pipa’ was a big cart pulled by two famished mules, carrying a big iron tank filled with the shit that neighbor ladies, threw out, carrying stinking chamber pots. […] The pulquerías and the piquerías [bars] were the first gathering places for the ‘plebs."

---

532 Granovetter, "The Strength of Weak Ties": 204.

533 “El barrio Latino [...]  La ‘plebe’ se revolvía con los burros, los cuales se apareaban a la vista de todo aquel que quisiera ver el espectáculo. Fue la primera pornografía de la ‘raza’, el olor a estiércol era en esos tiempos el ‘smog’ de la capital, también las coladeras ayudaban, así como la basura y los desperdicios que se pudrian con los rayos del sol en las aceras, lodo y empedrado […] La pipa era un carretón tirado por dos mulas famélicas, portando un gran tanque de gruesa lamina que recogía la mierda que solían tirar las vecinas portando sendas bacínicas atestadas […] Los primeros centros de reunión de la ‘plebe’ fueron las pulquerías y las piquerías.” Granados, Carpas de México, 19-21.
Social stigma is again evoked by Granados’ use of the derogatory term “plebe,” (plebs) in common use at the time. Elsewhere in his text, the recognition of the carpas as “miserable”, and of the people in them as “la raza” (the race), or “la leperuza” (a bunch of léperos), associates this community with debased and dirty spaces.

Granados’ symbolization of the carpas as “bonfires” and “bivouacs” resignifies the barrio as a geographic space that not only hosted disturbing memories, but also safeguarded people who bore a clear social stigma. Granados describes the environment by cross-referencing his senses of smell and hearing, while simultaneously celebrating prostitution, promiscuity, and drunkenness: behaviors that were supposedly typical of the barrio as well as of the carpas:

[The street of] Cuauhtemotzin was a true center of ‘whoreyness’ each basement apartment [accesoria] led to a door with a ‘flibbertigibbit’, [‘zuripanta’] most of them French, brought by their ‘apaches’ [Granados explains this word to the reader as ‘pimps’ (padrotes)]. They charged the fabulous amount of one peso for ‘all three things’ […] Promiscuity and the horrid stench of the urinals made a nauseating environment… the peals of laughter, insults and other names called with shrill yells harmonized with the organ grinder, the guitarrón, the mandolin, and the autoharp of ambulant musicians who were very drunk. 534

Smells

The poor sanitary infrastructure of the city in general at the time, and more specifically the meager material conditions of the carpas that had been displaced to outlying neighborhoods, explains raised awareness of the surrounding smells. 535 Furthermore, physical proximity among members of the carpas community obliges us to consider the issue of body odor. As Alain Corbain and Constance

534 “[La calle de] Cuauhtemotzin fue el verdadero centro ‘puteril’, cada accesoria tenía a la puerta una ‘zuripanta’ en su mayoría francesas, traída por sus “apaches”, (los padrotes) y que cobraba la fabulosa cantidad de un peso por las “tres cosas” […] La promiscuidad y el espantoso hedor del los urinarios formaban un ambiente nauseabundo…las carcajadas, mentadas de madre y otros epítetos con gritos destemplados, armonizaban con el cilindro, el guitarrón, la mandolina, el salterio de músicos ambulantes que andaban bien trovos.” Granados, Carpas de México, 21.

535 Granados testimony referring to the “horrid stench of the urinals” coincides with official claims raised against the carpas due to sanitary reasons (see chapter two). Since these informal theaters did not have toilets, it might have been possible that some members of the audience went to nearby restaurants or coffee shops. Most likely however, people—men at least—would simply find relief in hidden corners behind and outside the carpas.
Constance Classen have noted, bodily smells can subconsciously work as a strong integrative force within groups of people. In addition, the classification of odors as malodorous or pleasant has typically served to mark differences of social class.\(^{536}\)

Granados’ writing about these aspects seems to me more than a simple evocation: rather, it stands as a kind of rhetorical maneuver through which he deliberately plays up the repulsive as something that is “natural” to the “poor,” even romanticizing it. The effect of this narrative performance is the creation of a sense of authenticity that plays upon the romantic idea that poverty and privation were somehow more “real” to downtown urban life than other modes of existence. By providing such an alternative narrative of who counts as the “legitimate” or “authentic” urban citizen, Granados’ rhetorical strategy clearly contrasts with the elite’s views on how urban space should be allocated. Granados thus offers an alternative history of the City; one that some scholars concerned with the study of marginality would call a narrative from the “underside of history.”\(^{537}\)

**Taste (and Similar Practices of Intake)**

Scholars working in recent decades on the intersections between embodiment and social-class construction have generally adopted Pierre Bourdieu’s positioning of the body as an

\(^{536}\) Concerned with the olfactory aspects of sensuous perception, Constance Classen has cogently detailed how odors have served as sensuous mechanisms to build social identifications and, depending on who narrates the experience of olfactory perception, have also been used to justify antipathies for other social groups. She asserts that the dominant class has tended to characterize it self as inodorate, or pleasant-smelling, while it has referred to lower classes as foul smelling and hence offensive. The many connotations associated to the odors emanated from other social collectives, are then linguistic mechanisms of discrimination where social violence is exerted. Similarly, Alain Corbain has explored olfactory memories to talk about odor perception and categorization as historically and culturally grounded. This has helped him posit olfactory perception and olfactory vigilance as an important element in the construction of the French social imaginary in the late 18th and 19th centuries. See Constance Classen, “The Odor of the Other: Olfactory Symbolism and Cultural Categories,” in *Ethos* 20, no. 2 (1992): 133-66 and Alain Corbain, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (London: Papermac, 1996).

\(^{537}\) This term has been used by followers of Enrique Dussel’s philosophy of liberation, to talk about the mechanisms of representation of those “who have been oppressed, victimized and excluded by the system of domination.” See Linda Martin Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta eds., *Thinking from the underside of history: Enrique Dussel’s Philosophy of liberation* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 214.
indisputable materialization of taste. Foods, drinks, and other ingestible substances also play an equally relevant role in terms of being identified with a given social class. As Bourdieu points out, the preference for certain flavors and the ingestion of certain foods is constitutive of each person’s *habitus*, which in turn is socially decoded as an element constitutive of social class.\(^{538}\) As is very evident from oral histories and testimonies, food was an important component of the carpas experience, not only because of the expanded sociability in the surrounding coffee shops, pulquerías, and restaurants, but also because of the length of shows and the possibility of staying for additional tandas led many spectators to bring their own food inside the carpas to eat and share as they enjoyed the show. As actress Gloria Alicia Inclán remembered,

> There were those carpas in the barrios Balmis and Santa Julia […] The show started at three o’clock in the afternoon. People came in large numbers to the carpa, there were seats, they were like a defense, those seats. The people brought their kids, their lunch box, their drinks, because they would stay all afternoon. They roosted from that time until nine or ten [at night] because the show was continuous.\(^{539}\)

A picture of the Carpa Mariposa in 1928 captures the social ambiance outside of this carpa (Fig 5.3). Meanwhile, a closer view permits the observation of the food vendors who worked outside the carpas (Fig. 5.3a). This detailed close-up also shows that this carpa, located in the streets of Pradera and General Anaya, was right next to a cantina. Even in cases when carpas were not placed close to a cantina or pulquería, oral histories have sustained that the visit of a vendor with

\(^{538}\) “Taste, a class culture turned into nature, that is embodied helps to shape the class body. It is an incorporated principle of classification which governs all forms of incorporated principle of classification, choosing and modifying everything that the body ingests and digests and assimilates, physiologically and psychologically. It follows that the body is the most indisputable materialization of class taste.” Pierre Bourdieau, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984), 210.

\(^{539}\) “Estaban esas carpas en los barrios de Balmis y Santa Julia. […] Empezaba la función a 1 tres de la tarde. Llegaba la gente en tropel a la carpa, había gradas, eran la defensa esos gradas. La gente llevaba a sus chamacos, su itacate, su refrescos, porque ahí iban a estar toda la tarde. Se aposentaban desde esa hora hasta las nueve o diez porque había función continua.” Inclán in Merlin, *Vida y Milagros*, 132.
a mule carrying a clay pot with pulque would provide attendees at the carpas with the bewildering and odorous beverage.\footnote{Unlike the distilled tequila, pulque is fermented drink obtained from cactus plant, a feature that makes it fresher but also more difficult to preserve. Sappy textured and sparkling in the mouth when at its ideal point of fermentation, pulque has been called the “native Mexican champagne.” However, hot weather accelerates its fermentation, causing an intense odor resembling that of baby’s vomit; and because the fermentation process continues after it has been ingested, the body of the pulque drinker has that smell too. Furthermore and not to be underestimated is the fact that, among the many virtues of pulque are its laxative properties, which makes for another probable factor in the olfactory environment of the carpas.}

**Figure. 5.3.** Carpa Mariposa
On the other side of the carpa there are people who are either awaiting their turn, or who, unable to pay even the fifteen cents, are peeping through the cracks of the wood plates. (Fig 5.3b)
Recollections by Pedro Granados and certain songs from the later period suggest that consumption of marijuana could have also been a common activity among visitors to the carpas. This practice, euphemistically referred by locals as “drinking leaf tea” (infusiones) or “smoking a leaf cigar” (“fumar cigarrillo de bojitas”, “cigarro de hierbas”), was common, if not inside the carpas, at least in the surrounding barrios. Pedro Granados remembers seeing a woman of whom he recalls, “people said that in her purse she had all sort of herbs, from marijuana to rosemary (to fix the valves) [intestines] and branches to make limpias and eliminate the ‘bad salt’ [bad luck].” 541

This habit is unsurprising considering that until 1920, when it was declared illegal, marijuana was commonly sold in local drugstores (boticas), and frequently used for recreational purposes. Historian Guillermo Valdés Castellanos even claims that marijuana was the “cigarette of the popular classes”, including soldiers during the Revolution war. 542 If Granados refers to marijuana smoking jokingly, press sources confirm it seriously. While Granados writes about a social practice that was already illegal, it is highly probably that this habit was still common among the people he remembers. A newspaper note published in 1932 reports the case of a man going by the nickname “Cara Cortada” (“scar face”) who after having been caught selling several marijuana cigarettes, declared that he had held his business for over a year in the streets of Allende and República de Cuba. As he declared, his merchandise had been provided by members of the military forces in the Shooting School (Escuela de Tiro) located a few blocks to the east, at the limits of the urbanized area.

541 “el vulgo decía que en su bolsa traía yerbas de todas clases, desde marihuana, romero (para ajustar las válvulas) y ramas para hacer las limpias y eliminar ‘la mala sal.’ He also tells us that “[among the pimps of the barrio] there were some who found delight in the ‘sacred herb’ (marijuana), they formed a group and rolled their ‘joint’, they finished themselves with candy or piloncillo.” “[entre los padrotes de barrio] había algunos que se dedicaban al deleite de la “yerba sagrada” (marijuana), formaban un grupo y se ponían a retozar su ‘llegue’, se refinaban con dulce o piloncillo.” Granados, Carpas de México, 29, 33.

542 The lyrics of corrido “La Cucaracha,” as sung in contemporary times, are arguably inspired by Pancho Villa in what is possibly a musical interpretation of the liking that combatants of the Revolution had for marijuana. See Guillermo Valdés Castellanos, Historia del narcotrafico en México. (México: Santillana, 2013), 31-36. A similar account of the legal history of cannabis can be consulted in Luis Astorga, El siglo de las drogas: el narcotrafico, del Porfiriato al nuevo milenio. (México: Plaza y Janés, 2005), 17-38.
The intersection referred to in “Cara Cortada’s” declaration is located a few streets east of the barrio Santa María la Redonda, thus reinforcing the veracity of Granados’ testimony. An excerpted image of the downtown map permits me to locate the exact corner where this dealer was caught, hence revealing the fact that his illicit business took place openly in a central location. (Fig. 5.4) Not surprisingly, the newspaper note concluded by proclaiming that “everybody knew that the selling of marijuana was a common practice in the most central streets of the city, in the doors of bars and cabarets, without the police even noticing it.”

This suggests that, just as pulque, food, and other products were consumed in or near the carpas, so was this sense-stimulating herb. If marijuana was indeed consumed in the carpas long after it had been illegal, and apparently with the unresponsiveness of the police, we can consider that tolerance in the carpas accounted for more than just erotic musical theater.

Fig 5.4 Corner where a marijuana seller nicknamed “Cara Cortada” was caught.

Assuming the connections between marijuana smoking and the carpas are real, the laughter-inducing effects of the herb may have inspired the song “La Risa” (Laughter). Performed by Fregoli

543 “En el centro de la ciudad se han descubierto expendios de marihuana,” (En cabarets y cantinas nocturnas se comercia con esta hierba). El Popular, (January 5, 1932).
Vargas as singer, with Guillermo Posadas on the guitar, this recording dates from 1928. According to Jorge Miranda, a music historian interviewed in a retrospective radio program recorded in the 1980s, Fregoli Vargas was the Mexican imitator of the Italian actor Leopoldo (Luigi) Fregoli. The song is a short comedic act in which a woman asks her *compadre* Pantaleón to sing this song. He refuses because “this song makes him tired,” but ends up agreeing due to her insistence. A single guitar playing a waltz-like rhythm serves as the instrumental accompaniment. The brief guitar introduction includes a funny moment that emulates human laughter. This humorous effect is achieved by a descending scale going from the fifth degree to the tonic, but articulated in fast descending glissandos of thirds. Because this gesture needs to be done rather rapidly to achieve its comedic effect, it also requires considerable technical skill on the part of the performer. (Sound example No. 4 “La Risa” in Appendix)

The lyrics of the song are very simple, and one could argue, even nonsensical. Therefore, the comedic element must have been achieved almost entirely by the execution. Attention is focused on the performative skills of the singer who, in telling a funny anecdote, gradually begins laughing at his own story. As his laughter increases in intensity, the pulse of the guitar increases as well. This fit of laughter reaches its climax when it renders the performer unable to sing the complete story, so that he has to switch to speaking. It is at this moment that, seemingly startled, the guitarist has to stop playing. From then on, the text of the song is interspersed with peals of laughter and with arduous attempts to finish the story, which is at this point unintelligible. The intention of this song is clearly

---

544 Years later, this song was compiled in the retrospective album “Las carpas de México” by the Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos. Serie Cultural AMEF 33.

545 Conversation between radio announcer Socorro Gutiérrez and Jorge Miranda, in “La música de nuestro México No. 68. “Las Carpas,” Instituto Mexicano de la Radio, now hosted in the archives of the Fonoteca Nacional-(FN08010135073): 11' 57'' -15' 43''.

328
ludicrous. Most likely, the game ended once the audience had been subsumed into the contagious laughter.

Lizita se fue a visita...jajaja
Y le dieron chocolate
Ja ja ja
Se lo dieron tan caliente,
(Ja ja comadrita)
¡Que hasta se quemó el gaznate!
¡Ay, ja ja ja ja!
Se lo dieron tan caliente
Ja ja ja ja ja ja...
(Hubieran ustedes visto la trompa que paraba)
Que hasta se quemó el gaznate.

Cuando naranja, naranja,
cuando limones limones
cuando naranja, ja ja ja ja,

Pachita cuando te bañas,
Ja ja ja ja
(cuando te quitas la mugre)
jjajajaja
ay que bonita te pones!

Ay niña, cuando te bañas,
Ay que bonita te pones.

Yo estaba re’ enamorado
de una preciosa criatura,
y al otro día de casado,
Vi que era pura pintura.
Ay, jajaja, ay, ja ja ja ja ja ja...

(Hágame cosquillas comadre que ya no puedo)

Lizita went to visit… Ha ha ha ha
And they gave her hot chocolate
Ha hahaha
But it was so hot,
(Ha ha ha, comadrita)
That she burnt her gullet!
Ha ha ha ha
The chocolate was so hot,
Ha ha ha ha ha
(You should have seen her face!
And the big mouth she made)
That she burned her gullet

If orange, orange,
If lemons, lemons,
If orange, Ha ha ha ha

Pachita, when you take showers,
You look very pretty,
(when you get rid of that dirt)
Ha ha ha ha
you look very beautiful

Oh girl, when you take showers
You look very pretty

I was very much in love,
Of a beautiful creature,
But the day after our wedding,
I realized it was all make up.
Ha ha ha ha ha!

(Comadrita, please, tickle me,
I can’t any more)

It would far exceed the purposes of this chapter to illustrate the great array of multi-sensorial and synesthetic references evoked by Granados and other members of the carpas audiences. I hope this brief sensory survey has served to persuade the reader that memories of the experience at the carpas were by no means only auditory. Indeed, all five senses are crucial for understanding the connections between material space, the emergence of a sense of belonging to the inhabited space, and the elaborations of collective identifications of social class. It was through these that the spectators constructed their memories around the carpas. When experienced through everyday use,
the materiality of the barrio and the carpas provided a gamut of intertwined symbols through meaning was anchored for those who identified collectively as social outcasts.

**Internalization and Reversal of the Stigma**

A full engagement with Granados’ testimony would suggest that, by embracing a derogatory self-conception, the carpas community was able to come to terms with adverse material conditions such as segregation, poor urban infrastructure, floods, lack of sanitary services, and pungent odors, in part by romanticizing their own poverty as a reason for pride. As symbolic sociologist Erwin Goffman has explained, the social stigma commonly associated with *de facto* seclusion and material dispossession is often turned into an emblem of identity for those affected by it. As a result, the self-recognition as “poor” and “miserable” leads to self-acceptance and the subjective internalizing of an “inferior” identity, or what Goffman calls a “spoiled identity.”

As Granados’ account illustrates, the people around the carpas forged a sense of morality that embraced prostitution, crime or promiscuity as if these were the cultural habits that “naturally” corresponded them, thus reclaiming them as their own.

And yet the above interpretation demands close scrutiny of Pedro Granados’ social position. Little is known about this man besides the fact that he was a resident of the downtown area, that he frequently participated in the shows as an audience member, and that he compiled photographs and other documents and retrospectively narrated his memories of the carpas. If we take at face value the words of his friend Luis Ortega, the man who wrote the prologue to Granados’ book, we find out that this assiduous visitor of the carpas was by no means a social outcast. Instead, Pedro Granados was an impresario involved in the business of gastronomy and who, in Ortega’s words, later became a “prestigious Maitre d’Hotel, a friend of rich and poor and a person sought after by

---

powerful people. He was tremendously attractive to women whom he would charm with his extraordinary sense of humor, his courtesy, and his savoir faire.”

(Indeed, the fact that Pedro Granados was a frequent visitor to the carpas provides compelling evidence that the audiences of the carpas did not exclusively consist of the “poor” or the “working classes.”)

It is precisely in this convergence of social classes that the most interesting affective legacy of the carpas as material and symbolic spaces for community integration begin to emerge. Granados reports having felt like a full participant in the carpas culture. As a frequent audience member, he not only knew most of the repertory, but also socialized with actors, singers, actresses, and carpa managers. Especially during the second stage of the carpas, (between 1930 and 1950), he inhabited the same material space with these people, used it, and seemed to understand its social codes. In sum, without necessarily sharing the same material dispossession, Granados was a participant observer (while not an insider) to the carpas culture, and one who felt warmly welcomed into this community. Thus in the 1980s – almost thirty years after the carpas’ apex – he felt not only compelled but also entitled to “rescue” the memories of the carpas. Writing from this perspective, he contributed to the carpas’ historical inscription in ways that, he believed, remedied the indifference from critics and historians. As Granados himself expressed it:

There are few documents from those days. The carpas were not visited by theater critics, nor by photographers; maybe by a bohemian such as Jaime Luna, Rivas Larrauri or Ortega and other sporadic journalists, that got as far as the malodorous dressing rooms. Nonetheless, from our personal archive of artists, we [I] will offer photographs, programs, and press cuttings that will attest to the epoch I am talking about.  

The historiographical implications of Granados’ text are now clear: this is an issue of representation of the popular classes. The fragmentary state of the archive precludes direct access to the

547 Luis Ortega in Granados, *Carpas de México*, 12.

548 “Pocos documentos hay de ese tiempo. Las carpas no eran visitadas por los críticos, ni por los fotógrafos, quizá sí por algún bohemio de la talla de Jaime Luna, Rivas Larrauri o de Ortega y otros desbalagados periodistas, llegaban hasta los malolientes camerinos. Sin embargo, de nuestro archivo popular de los propios artistas, presentaremos fotos, programas y recortes que darán fe de la época a la que nos referimos.” Granados, *Carpas de México*, 52.
experiences of people who participated in the carpas, especially during the first stage of their existence. As Gayatri Spivak has noted, the silencing of the subaltern perspective is axiomatic, in the sense that we can only access the traces those experiences have left behind through the voice of others who depict them. Unless we learn to read actions as performative texts – as I attempted in chapter four – no narratives can unveil the perspectives of these marginalized people.

In chapter four I considered theories of the popular in music and their implications for the study of the carpas. I illustrated some of the ways in which ideas of the poor or the popular, as embodied by specific characters, were enacted on stage at the carpas shows. In the case of Granados’ book, the enactment of the popular is literary. Through crafting a writing persona that identifies with and celebrates the “poor,” he believes he can voice the desires and experiences of those he sees as “the pueblo,” the “plebe,” and the “raza.” Yet, the frequency with which he uses scare quotes for slang and for terms that refer to the people of the barrio connotes light sarcasm as well as an overt romanticizing of the people he claims to represent.

The interesting point here, at least in my reading of it, is not whether Granados was truly dispossessed or not, but rather, the reasons why he professed a sense of identification with the people of the carpas. As it appears, in spite of his social standing and/or income level, he genuinely shared musical, affective, and other sensorial preferences with members of the carpas community. Granados’ preferences suggest that class-taste hierarchies were not as exclusive as contemporary critics, journalists and, later on, theorists might make them seem.

---

549 See chapter four.
Memorializing and Historical Inscription

If Granados’ memories are mere subjective depictions or enactments, their symbolic import in shaping imaginaries of the carpas as well as notions of social class is all the more powerful. In recalling past experiences, awareness of passing time emerges, and with it forgetfulness starts to take place. As Serematakis contends, such acts of remembrance are not only performative, but also manifest a moment of historical reflexivity firmly anchored in the material realm.

Performance can be such an act of perceptual completion as opposed to being a manipulative theatrical display. Performance is also a moment where the unconscious levels and accumulated layers of personal experience become conscious through material networks, independent of the performer. (...) this performance is not performative -- the instantiation of a pre-existing code. (...) this can be a moment of sensory self-reflectivity and because it is located within in, and generated by, material forces, we can begin to see how material culture functions as an apparatus for the production of social and historical reflexivity.550

Serematakis elaborates that this enactment, as distinguished from a performative act, is what helps achieve the wedding of memory and experience as an indissoluble unit. Memory is constructed by sensorial experiences through a process she has termed “deferred consumption,” which explains the inter-relational acquisition of a sensory gamut. For her, “objective reality” does not exist because everything is mediated through the sensorial realm and the emotions that the memory of this realm awakens.551 As she writes:

There is no such thing as one moment of perception and then another of memory, representation and objectification. Mnemonic processes are intertwined with the sensory order in such a manner as to render each perception as re-perception. Re-perception is the creation of meaning through the interplay, witnessing and cross-metaphorization of co-implicated sensory spheres.552


551 “The return to the senses (experiential or theoretical) can never be a return to realism; to the thing-in-it self, or to the literal. In realism, matter is never deferred, but supposedly subjected to total consumption. When [the perceiving subject] returns to the senses, this passage will always be mediated by memory and memory is concerned with, and assembled from, sensory and experiential fragments. This assemblage will always be an act of imagination- thus opposed to the reductions of realism.” Idem, 29.

552 Idem, 9.
In this formulation, the question of whether the carpas were “objectively poor,” or any one else in the carpas community for the matter, becomes secondary. Beyond their claims of veracity, the legacy of testimonies like Granados’ reveal the ways in which attendance at these shows provided residents of the downtown area with an array of social interactions and sensorial experiences that facilitated awareness of, and sensibilization to, their material and emotional environments. Affective accounts imply that membership in the carpas community had less to do with economic standing than with repeated exposure to sensorial and societal aspects such as the touch and smells of bodies, the sharing of foods and drinks, and a general enjoyment of socialized comedy and music listening. If we admit that these sensory spheres are provided by the material environment and hence form the foundations of cultural memory, it becomes understandable that when the physical space of the city started to change rapidly, the people who inhabited it started to fear for the preservation of their cultural memories, and indeed for their very sense of self.

The physical changes in the city were closely connected to the political agendas of the different governments, as I illustrated in chapter two. Towards the second half of the 1920s Mexico City had undergone radical societal changes, and the visual transformation of the city was meant to reflect a clear break with what was seen as a conservative past. The realization among barrio neighbors that the city was rapidly changing thus may have triggered a feeling of anxiety among members of the carpa community who sensed their experience of inhabiting the barrio was being compromised. Not coincidentally, the carpas started to be nostalgically narrated at the end of the 1920s. It was during this time that the carpas community began to recognize these theaters as an ephemeral phenomenon, and to feel compelled to memorialize them by capturing their role as repositories of the identity of the urban working class. As Paul Ricoeur asserts concerning the recollection of memories, “one searches for what one fears having forgotten.”

---

553 Ricoeur, Memory History and Forgetting, 27.
Connerton has claimed that “the desire to memorialize is precipitated by a fear, a threat of cultural amnesia,” that it comes as a “tacit acknowledgment of the approaching disappearance.” While such disappearance did not take place for another twenty to twenty-five years, the carpas were radically transformed. Ironically, but not perhaps not so surprisingly after all, such transformation happened though their legitimization. If such social anxiety far preceded the event, one could argue that such collective disquiet was inspired by the possibility to stop feeling a social outcast and thus to have to let go the uniqueness of this “spoiled communitarian-self.”

Poetry, painting, and drawing can shed light on affective reactions to the transformation of the city, and hence be understood as gestures that point to a collective fear for the fate of the early carpas. If Granados’ book is a memorial, a memory recovered long after the carpas had disappeared, the illustrated prose poem “Morality in the neighborhood carpas” (“La Moralidad en las carpas de Barriada”), published in 1928, is to my knowledge the first symptom of fear of forgetting the carpas. The prose poem, by Manuel Horta, was published by the weekly supplement Revista de Revistas, with an accompanying cartoon, shown below (Fig. 5.5). The caricaturesque drawing by Roberto Cueva del Río portrays a trivial moment in one of the barrios in downtown Mexico City, while the text explaining it prompts the viewer to recreate the sensory landscape of the 1920s. A description is provided at the foot of the image: “Roberto Cueva del Río, the new artist, offers us this cartoon of the suburb with the picturesque and jovial tones in which lives the labyrinth of a carpa, food stalls, the drunken men, the pulquería, and the last horse cart [calandria].

---

554 Connerton, How Modernity Forgets, 27, 29.
556 “Roberto Cueva del Río, el nuevo dibujante, nos ofrece este cartón del suburbio con notas pintorescas y risueñas en que vive el laberinto de una carpa, los puestos, el borrachito, la pulquería y la última calandria.” Idem.
The picture conveys an air of crowded conviviality and also of close intimacy, perhaps an effect of the underwear hung on ropes above the streets, a pictorial acknowledgment of a practice that blurs the boundaries between the inside and outside of the home. At the front of the small carpa, in the center of the image, a *gritón de carpas*, advertises the famous show “Don Juan Tenorio,” enticing passersby to come in. The slow trot of a horse merges with a barking dog traveling on top of a truck’s hood, while the engine of a bus roars as if complaining about the blockage caused by a gendarme reprimanding a drunken man. *(Fig 5.5a)* To the side of the jacalón (similar to the photo

---

557 Coming directly from Spanish theater tradition of Don Juanes initiated by Tirso de Molina’s *El burlador de Sevilla y convidado de piedra* (1630), the play *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844) by José Zorrilla illustrates how the repertory of “illustrated” theater had already become part of popular culture and was appropriated at the carpas. Since the 19th century this play was customary performed in Mexico in late October and early November, which is to say during the days surrounding the celebrations of All Saints, also known in Mexico as Day of the Death. Recurrence of this play in around the same months every year has made of this play a sort of temporal marker within the Mexican calendar of rituality, and thus part of popular culture. (See Monsiváis definition of “popular culture in Ch. 5)
of the Carpa Mariposa in Fig. 5.3b), people peep though the cracks of rotten wood planks, as a man with an ice cream cart tinkles his bells, calling out the fruity flavors of his treats. A balloon vendor talks to the woman next to him, who sells pulque from a robust clay pot. Meanwhile, the smell of frying crackling from the store in the nearest corner engulfs it all. (Fig. 5.5a) Far in the distance, the bells of a colonial church punctually call the faithful herd to the afternoon mass.

Figure 5.5a Detail “Moralidad en las carpas de barrio”

Figure 5.5b Detail “Moralidad en las carpas de barrio.” (left side)
In spite of its picturesque details, my imaginative recreation of this bygone moment sounds blunt when contrasted with the accompanying poetic prose with which it was originally published. My full transcription and translation of Horta’s prose poem can be consulted in the appendix section. (Appendix 18) I have not been able to verify if the carpa poetically described in this text was real or imaginary. However, Manuel Horta, author of the poem, tells us that the carpa he commemorates was located in the barrio Santa María la Redonda. He calls this carpa “Martínez de la Torre”, most likely in reference to the actual Plaza Martínez de la Torre, located between the streets of Mosqueta and Degollado, only four blocks away from the Buenavista train station. An excerpted detail of a map from 1926 shows the exact location where this carpa would have been (Fig. 5.6).

Figure 5.6. Location of Plaza Martínez de la Torre.

558 The name of this plaza commemorates Rafael Martínez de la Torre (1828-1876), a lawyer and chief of the Ayuntamiento Office who was responsible of the widening of the city of the construction of housing to the east of the downtown area. Politically active in years during the Maximato, he was deeply involved in the development of the colonia Buenavista. See Jorge H. Jiménez Muñoz, “El crecimiento de la Ciudad de México: origen del negocio inmobiliario moderno en el D.F.,” in Relatos e historias en México, (No. 22, June 2010); and ___, La traza del poder: historia de la política y los negocios urbanos en el Distrito Federal de sus orígenes a la desaparición del ayuntamiento (1824-1928), (México: Dédalo/Codex Editore, 1993).
Manuel Horta (1897-1983) – who at the time of this poem’s publication was thirty-one years old – was a writer, a poet, and years later would become a chronicler of popular culture, most notably in relation to bullfights. His description of this carpa is infused with a distinctive nostalgic tone eulogizing what he feels to be the past glories of the carpas. Evoking a cuplé from 1917, the year when the armed phase of the Revolution came to an end and when Horta would have reached the age of twenty, the poet recalls the tiple who awoke his “juvenile insomnia” and refers to this carpa as a “refuge of popular tedium” (Appendix 18, paragraph 1). Reminiscing about the rhythmic influences of black music from the United States, he talks about the “Africanism of Yankee music” and pokes fun at the out-of-tune melodies of a violin, mocking the microtonal style of modernist composer Julián Carrillo (paragraph 3), who – not incidentally – was also a member of the controversial Council of Arts and Culture. In this piece, Horta crafts a fictional feminine character who traded the comforts of a middle-class life for the joys of singing at the carpas. The diva, a girl-faced woman who is thought to emulate the moves of the famous vedette Lupe Vélez, brought sensual joy to these theaters with chants that resembled “cat cries” and which, to Horta’s ears, represented the distinctive singing style of the jacalones (Appendix 18, paragraphs 4-5). By emplotting events as if they were faint remembrances of a remote past, the poet depicts his imaginary singer as “a woman who once was the idol of the cheap tanda,” but which in 1928, “had the charm of wilted flowers pressed in a love-story book” (Appendix 18, paragraph, paragraph 7). Horta then relates the plaintive passing of a horse carriage, pronouncing it “the last that remains in the city,” and closes with a sad lament talking to the carpa as if to a decrepit woman: “you have the pain of poverty in the lightless pupils of your singers, in the dusty dancing of your artists” (Appendix 18, paragraph 13).

The copious details provided in this melancholic piece seem to have been initiated by Horta’s desire to capture and preserve the memory of the carpas in the face of what he foresaw as
their imminent disappearance. The pathos of his narrative style works as a living tribute to what he feels to be the vanishing carpa shows, while hinting at a need to seize to the sensory landscape they nurtured. Furthermore, Horta’s omniscient and panoptical position places the reader in a privileged standpoint, from which rescuing events, people, and sensations from forgetfulness, seems possible. In this poem the poet witnesses the passing of time, while also selecting what he thinks is worth securing for the history of the carpas before modernity erases it all. Through his narration, what would otherwise be an inconsequential afternoon at a carpa theater appears to our eyes and ears as an exceptional occasion, a reflection on the daily routines of the people at a barrio whose future Horta presages as dubious.

Indeed, as the years passed the city experienced even more dramatic transformations. From the 1930s to 1960s, the network of streets expanded as the boundaries of the city expanded, and existing streets were widened. The city in general was increasingly equipped with new paving and transportation facilities; technology progressed and a subway system was inaugurated. Additionally, more modern and spacious housing alternatives were erected for the constantly growing population of the city. The carpas were gradually, but decisively, displaced, first from the downtown area to other suburbs in the growing city, until they finally became extinct towards the end of the 1970s.

It is this slow process of extinction of the carpas that stands out as the primary material of remembrance among participants in the second phase of the carpa scene. Roberto Montúfar Sánchez, for example, remembers: “I think it was modernization and bad elements who killed the carpas. […] when [mayor Ernesto] Uruchurtu came [1952-1966], he put an end to all carpas.” 559 Similarly, comedian Guadalupe Martínez Carpalimpia recalls: “Because the carpas disappeared gradually, now [1990] there are only a few of them and a few circuses. When spaces in

the city were reduced, [the carpas] died out. [Urban planners] made median strips and then the television came.”

In addressing the issue of historicity and everyday life, Serematakis has maintained that everyday material experience is a “zone of devaluation, forgetfulness and inattention.” Nevertheless, she acknowledges that quotidian events open a window for political transformation. So much so, that even when everyday life experiences go unnoticed and run the risk of oblivion and historical silence, they also offer the opportunity to harbor embodied memories that “evade political grids and control,” and thus can create the materials for narrating alternative histories. As Serematakis powerfully expresses,

> Everyday life is always a privileged site of political colonization […] because it is also the site where new political identities can be fabricated by techniques of distraction; where power can make its own self-referential histories by absenting anything that relativizes it. Everyday life is mythicized as the atopic and as the repository of passivity, precisely because it harbors the most elusive depths, obscure corners, transient corridors that evade political grids and controls. Yet, everyday life is also the zone of lost glances, oblique views and angles, where micro-practices leak through the crevices and cracks of official cultures and memories.

Within these material, ideological, and affective transformations, there are moments of enhanced perceptual consciousness, instants of contemplation that she calls “stillness”: “stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten, escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust.”

The apprehension revealed in Horta’s poem, however, is not for the barrio or the carpas themselves, but rather for the feelings and sensations they inspired in him. Therefore I have taken Serematakis’ work one step further and called these ephemeral moments “endangered sensations”: a

---

560 “Es porque las carpas se fueron acabando que ahora solo quedan muy pocas y algunos circos. Al reducir los espacios se fueron acabando, hicieron camellones y luego vino la televisión.” Guadalupe Martínez Caralimpia, in Merlin, *Vida y milagros*, 99.


562 Idem, 12.
term that refers to the processes by which an individual or a group of people come to the realization that the material source of certain sensuous experiences is at risk of disappearing. In “La Moralidad en las carpas de Barriada,” Horta and visual artist Cueva del Río seize a moment in which they predict that the carpas are undergoing an irreversible transformation. Their performative actions – poetic description and drawing respectively – not only assist a moment of historical reflection but also contribute to retelling the official view of the carpas, hitherto monopolized by the Ayuntamiento inspectors. In this way they help to rework the collective memory of them. This moment of idealization of the theaters permits the observation of carpa-goers’ desire for rootedness and the longing for something that, although still present, is perceived as endangered and at risk of being annihilated and forgotten. The symbolic force of actions aimed at memorializing the carpas helped crystallize imaginaries of these theaters as entertainment for the “poor.” This in turn helped crystallize imaginaries of the “people,” which were eventually narrated as essential expressions of the true “national” art.

While neither Horta nor Cueva del Río stand as the best representatives of the “poor,” the marks of the “dispossessed” or the “disenfranchised” in their evocative pieces suggest they were participants in, or at least witnesses of, the carpas culture. This retrospectively turned them into voices of authority, very much as it was to do for Granados. The sympathy these men seem to show for the “poorness” within the carpas stands in contrast to the dismissive testimony of journalists and theater critics, and it may have stood as an additional factor in shaping, even in distorted ways, the collective memory of these shows among the carpas community. Sensing these radical changes, Rafael Cardona, perhaps one of the “sporadic journalists” evoked by Granados, joined the cohort of intellectuals by nostalgically writing in 1929:

The carpas will no longer have that mischievous air of sizzling festivity, where two or three actors invariably repeat the rural song, with the rancher’s grimace [of emotion] learned by heart: instead, materials scattered in the work of anonymous wit, the varied hues of barely mumbled dialogues and, finally, the synthetic pill given to us in homeopathic dilution, will be elevated to the category of a
truly pedagogical art, achieved through the concerted action of national drama and comedy.\textsuperscript{563}

**On Concealment and Forgetting**

Despite the vividness of the testimonies and accounts of the carpas by their participants, the presence of the middle class intelligentsia as audience members in the carpas is something that has been forgotten, concealed or erased from the carpas’ history. Paul Connerton explains that, from the primeval moment of written inscription (language), to the moment of passage to the senses, to the language of testimony (reflexivity), the process of forgetfulness is simultaneously engendered.

The relationship between memorials and forgetting is reciprocal: the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting. If giving monumental shape to what we remember is to discard the obligation to remember, that is because memorials permit only some things to be remembered and, by exclusion, cause others to be forgotten. Memorials conceal the past as much as they cause us to remember it.\textsuperscript{564}

It is thus key to consider that within this forgetting, memorializing of the carpas tended to conceal evidence of the convergence of different social classes. It was from this concealment that the history of the carpas, as an act of reflexivity about the past, began to be written.

As the years passed and the carpas shows became less prominent, many other theater scholars and historians reproduced ingrained ideas about their frugality, typically overlooking their transformation into the thriving centers of musical and comedy entertainment they became from 1930-1950s. Many authors have highlighted the poorness of the theaters, and attributed peoples’ preference for these shows to their inability to appreciate “true” artistic merit. A case in point is John B. Nomland, a Californian scholar specialized in Latin American literature, who in 1967

\textsuperscript{563} “Ya no tendrán las carpas ese airecillo maleante de juerga zumbona, en que dos o tres actores repiten invariablemente la canción rural con la mueca ranchera memorizada; sino que los materiales dispersos en la obra del ingenio anónimo, el variado matiz de los diálogos balbuceados apenas y en fin la pastilla sintética que se nos ha dado en diluciones homeopáticas, serán elevados a la categoría de un arte realmente pedagógico por medio de la acción concertada del drama y de la comedia nacionales.” Rafael Cardona, “El teatro popular mexicano,” in Revista de Revistas, (February 3, 1929).

published a book called *Teatro Mexicano Contemporáneo 1900-1950*. He dedicated a section to the carpas shows:

Any day of the week one can find a carpa in the Capitalino barrios. Even in the central streets of the city, the carpas can be noticed without even looking for them; however the theaters in themselves are not what matters here, but rather what it happens inside them. It must be considered that the amusement offered in the carpas is targeted to the working classes, who are ignorant of the subtleties of dramatic art, but ready, of course, to applaud the dances, acrobats, the buxom singers and the quick-witted comedians.\(^{565}\) [Italics are mine].

In the long term, such views disregarded the presence of middle class people, intellectuals, and, occasionally, even members of the elites at these shows. Additionally, these historians and critics also omitted mention of the many musical genres that were shared across social classes, regardless of where they were performed. Eventually, such appreciations, elisions and omissions shaped the ways in which the carpas were subsequently studied. Socorro Merlín for example, writing in 1991, presumed the existence of something essentially “popular” in the songs at the carpas. She asserted that,

Songs at the carpas played an important role by joining language and music in a product for the popular taste. Popular songs are vehicles to express feelings that profoundly matter to those who enjoy them. The fact that these songs are composed of music and lyrics makes them very easy to assimilate, and [makes them] carriers of sensations that stimulate concepts and reproduce ideologies. *Popular song is part of the oral tradition of a population with scanty or nonexistent literacy; its easy music and consonant lyrics have been one of [sic] the elements to anchor and reproduce the idea of nation, and [they have served] to agglutinate around [this idea] in order to identify as Mexicans.*\(^{566}\)

\(^{565}\) “En cualquier día de la semana se puede encontrar una carpa en los barrios capitalinos. Hasta en las calles centrales de la ciudad las carpas se hacen notar sin necesidad de buscarlas; pero no son los teatros en sí lo que más nos interesa, sino lo que ocurre adentro. Debe considerarse que la diversión que se ofrece en las carpas está dirigida a las clases trabajadoras, ignorantes de las sutilezas del arte dramático; pero dispuestas desde luego a aplaudir los bailes, los acróbatas, las robustas cantantes y los cómicos de ágil humor.” John B. Nomland, *Teatro mexicano contemporáneo, 1900-1950* (México: Ed. de Bellas Artes, 1967), 172.

\(^{566}\) “La canción en la carpa jugó un papel importante al unir lenguaje y música en un producto de gusto popular. Las canciones son un medio para expresar sentimientos que atañen profundamente a quien gusta de ellas. El hecho de estar compuestas de música y letra las hace muy asimilables y portadoras de sensaciones que estimulan conceptos y reproducen ideologías. La canción popular es parte de la tradición oral de la población con poca o nula alfabetización, a través de su música fácil y su letra consonante ha sido uno de los elementos que han servido para anclar y reproducir la idea de nación y aglutinar al rededor de ella para identificarse como mexicanos.” Merlín, *Vida y milagros*, 55.
Merlín’s account reinforced typical views that the songs performed at the carpas responded to something implicitly understood as “popular taste” but which she never described. Her assumption that the members of the carpas’ audience were strictly the poor of the city, lead her to describe the songs performed at the carpas as defining elements of a social sector characterized in terms of its illiteracy, thus contributing to the imaginary of the carpas community as ignorant and “popular.”

Paradoxically, when defending the carpas as a theatrical expression, she defends the artistic merit of these shows and critiques the views of journalists in the early twentieth century who belittled the worth of the ‘barrio little shacks’ (“teatrillos de barriada”). She accuses these early critics of characterizing people at the carpas shows as ‘blunt’ and ‘grotesque,’ “as if these people necessarily had to be a degraded and miniaturized copy of the bourgeoisie.”567 Merlín’s conscientious awareness of the class struggle entailed in the debate for the aesthetic aspects of the carpas shows, makes even more striking her dismissal of the popular in their music. When she compares the carpas’ songs with other musical styles — music that she imagines and yet does not mention explicitly — the “popular” is defined in terms of its consonance and apprehensibility by the supposedly illiterate masses. She implicitly contrasts these two features with a musical otherness that, one can infer, would be “dissonant” and “ungraspable”, both traits associated with the modernist avant-garde or the elites. As a result, and most likely against her good intentions, Merlín perpetuates the class prejudice typically put into play to downgrade the musical practices of the carpas.

Merlín’s hasty assessment of the “popular” in music may be a result of historiographic constraints at the time of her research, as much as to her limited engagement with musicological debate. Her association between illiteracy and popular song reveals the extent to which such associations still remained unquestioned in the early 1990s. Because views like Nomland’s and Merlín’s have tended to dominate the historical narratives of the carpas, there has been a generalized

567 Merlín, Vida y milagros, 44.
acceptance of the poorness within the these shows as an unquestionable fact. Concomitantly and unjustifiably, the supposed ignorance of the carpas audiences has been equally undisputed. As I hope to have demonstrated, neither poverty nor ignorance were inherent to the carpas audiences. Instead, myriad factors contributed to the pauperization of the theaters, the companies, and the neighborhoods where these itinerant theaters were established. Likewise, the audience members and their cultural practices were systematically and successfully debased.

**Cooptation of the Carpas by the Industry of Entertainment**

From the decade of the 1930s, the post-revolutionary leaders located in new positions of political power found in the artistic movement of the “Mexican renaissance” an ideal vehicle for educating the population about the ideological values that eventually conformed Mexican nationalism. This movement consisted in the international exhibition of creative artists and performers in the areas of visual arts, literature, dance, music and theater. All of them were working towards a common goal: to ground the artistic production of the country on a hybrid, supposedly essential national identity.\(^{568}\)

The process of crystallization of the carpas as a “popular” manifestation began in the 1930s and came to full force during the 1950s, years during which, paradoxically, the carpas were no longer marginal but rather a mainstream form of urban entertainment already co-opted by the local entertainment industry. Although these new theatres had very little to do with their canvas-covered predecessors—and were in fact closer in performing style to the political revista shows—they preserved the name “carpas” as a guarantee of their authentic lineage. Theatrically, the revista and carpa stock characters that once served to ridicule authorities, verging on the rebellious and subversive, became mere caricatures, inoffensive clowns that simultaneously lampooned and fixed a

---

stereotype of the poor and disenfranchised urban subject. Cantinflas, simultaneously the last of the belligerent pelados and the first of the assimilated clowns, was one of the figures that most saliently made the journey from the humble carpa-jacalón to the national film industry. While this passage made him the epitome of success, it also, inadvertently but most definitively contributed to obscure the history of the first stage of the carpas scene.

While still marginal to the official circuits of art, the carpas were deeply impacted by nationalistic discourses and policies. Beginning in the 1930s, but most evidently during the 1950s, journalists and intellectuals who may never have attended the carpas started to write about them as the most authentic component of the tradition of Mexican popular theater. Such discourses served to craft the origin-myths around the carpas as much as to essentialize their “poorness.” Julio Bracho, writing in El Nacional in 1936, was one of the first figures to contribute to this process:

Without any doubt, the carpa is the true theater for the people [pueblo] … Of all the spectacles that nourish the [pueblo], and of those which it gives life by its mere existence, this is the only authentic one. In it are inscribed the authentic characters of the true spirit of the pueblo… of all scenes that give life to a fiction before the theatrical consciousness of an audience, the Carpa is the genuine representative of a true popular theatre.\textsuperscript{569}

Instead of seeing carpa-show characters as fictional archetypes, Bracho encumbers them with “the authentic characters of the people’s spirit.” Significantly too, he capitalizes the carpa, as to mark its uniqueness and importance.

Here, as with most nationalistic movements of the twentieth century, popular culture embodied in “the folk” provided the basis of the “true national culture.” If authorities and music critics once thought that the manifestations of the pueblo were “vulgar” and lacking in “taste,” now,

\textsuperscript{569} “La carpa es, sin lugar a dudas, el verdadero teatro del pueblo… De todos los espectáculos de que se nutre el pueblo y a los que da vida con la suya propia, es el único auténtico. En él quedan impresos los caracteres auténticos del espíritu del pueblo… de todas las escenas que dan vida a una ficción ante la consciencia teatral de un auditorio, la de la Carpa es la genuina representante de un verdadero teatro popular.” Julio Bracho, “La Carpa”, \textit{El Nacional}, suplemento cultural, Num. 284, (October 11, 1936): 3.

347
in the context of the nationalistic movement, such manifestations were condoned because, as these intellectuals argued, they would provide national drama with its “distinctive Mexican character.” A couple years after Bracho’s publication, painter, set designer, and art historian Miguel Covarrubias wrote his views in an academic journal. Originally published in English, Covarrubias’ ideas are typical of this line of thinking.

The drama in Mexico lags behind all the other arts; in fact, the theater cannot even be said to be in decadence simply because it has never emerged from a perennial state of infancy. The sincere and worthy efforts of the few intellectuals who have tried to lift the theater out of its stagnation have failed to shake the apathy of the bourgeoisie who could support a theater, but who unfortunately go rarely and then only for social stimulation regardless of the merits of the play or the performance. Out of the mire of bad theater, the carpas and the popular musical theaters stand forth as the only permanent contribution towards a Mexican theater. However crude, vulgar and tainted with bad taste they may be, they have created a style and a technique of the disconcerting mixture of rough slapstick and fine, biting satire that is characteristic of the Mexican humor.  

Belittling Mexican drama as an “eternal state of infancy”, Covarrubias finds in the carpas shows the only via to give Mexican theatre an identity of its own, through which it could finally mature.

Besides the erudite comments of these public figures, the growing nationalist influence of the early Mexican film industry was an important factor that contributed to the imaginary entanglement of poverty and popular culture, as well as to the fixation of such perspectives on the carpas shows and their protagonists. In films during this period,

dramas and melodramas took the central barrios as a central element to portray, for better or for worse, the lifestyles of the urban popular classes, sometimes to slander them, some times to idealize them, and rarely to try to understand them with serious and profound plots.


It was also during the period comprised between the 1930s and 1950s that film producers became interested in the carpas as a topic for their stories. They made considerable efforts to emulate the environment inside these theaters in the most “authentic” way possible. This included reproducing their penurious aspect. In consequence, carpas managers in the early 1930s discovered a new vein for exploiting their businesses; some of them decided to collaborate with the film industry by participating in such montages. The testimony of writer and theater critic Rafael Solana illustrates the point:

I was in contact with a carpa called Salón Petit, close to the theatre Follies in Santa María la Redonda, because I wrote the script for a movie that was the debut performance in Mexico of Carmen Montejo, and also of Hugo del Carril, who came with great prestige from Buenos Aires. That movie was called *A media luz o Salón Fru Fru* […] it took place in a carpa. The filmmaker, Antonio Montiel, went with Jorge Fernández to see this salon [carpa] and which belonged to a woman whose surname I think was Petit. They took measurements and went there with cameras to take photographs and reproduce it [the carpa] at the movie set as closely as possible. The stains in the tent, the dirt in it, they had anticipated it all. A budget of 75,000 pesos was considered to build that carpa-double. Then, Mrs. Petit heard [about it] and said ‘I will set up the entire carpa in the film set for 14,000.’ ‘Really?’ – asked Jorge Fernández– ‘and when?’ ‘Tomorrow itself.’ Mrs. Petit replied. And so, the movie was shot in the authentic carpa.

From Solana’s words one can infer that the authenticity of the carpas was given by the dirtiness, the stains in the tent and, in general terms, by its visual indicators of deprivation. In other words, by all those things that made the idea of material deprivation more plausible. Gradually, then, the poverty of these shows and the barrios in which they were located were turned into emblems of cultural identity.

---

572 “Yo tuve contacto con una carpa que se llamaba Salón Petit, cerca del teatro Follies en Santa María la Redonda, porque escribí el guión para una película para el debut en México de Carmen Montejo y el de Hugo del Carril, que venía prestigiadísimo de Buenos Aires. Esa película que se llamó *A media luz o Salón Fru Fru*, […] pasaba en una carpa. El director que era Antonio Montiel, fue con Jorge Fernández a ver este salón. Que era de una señora, creo que se apellidaba Petit. Tomaron medidas y fueron con cámaras para tomar fotografías y reproducirla con los foros lo más parecida posible. Las manchas de la lona, la mugre, todo lo tenían previsto. Entonces se hizo el presupuesto de 75 000 pesos para construir esa doble carpa. Entonces la señora Petit oyó eso y dijo: ‘Pues yo por 14,000 pesos le pongo la carpa en el estudio.’ ‘Ah, sí?’ dijo Jorge Fernández, ‘¿Y cuando?’ ‘Ya mañana mismo,’ contestó la señora Petit. Y así se filmó esa película en la carpa auténtica.” Rafael Solana, in Merlín, *Vida y milagros*, 155.
The film *Aguila o Sol* is another example of a filmic production in which the carpas shows were reproduced. Furthermore, in this production, one can witness the memorializing of the two stages of the carpas. Released in 1937 and directed by Arcady Boytler, the movie stars the famous actors Mario Moreno “Cantinflas,” the comedian Manuel Medel, and singer-actress Marina Tamayo in the respective roles of Polito and siblings Carmelo and Adriana. Raised in a Catholic orphanage, the three children establish a lifelong relationship that unites them as a family and that will eventually help them cope with the hardships of adult life. At the young age of nine, the children are notified that they will be soon transferred from the orphanage to schools where they will learn professions to become independent adults. Fearing their imminent separation, the three children escape the orphanage because they think it is better to live in the streets and “always be together,” than to be split apart and never see each other again. After sneaking through a tunnel at night, the three are shown wandering in the streets of the city until they reach a fair. Polito tells the others that he knows a way to see a show by peeping through the walls, and he takes his friends to it.

The young Polito’s guidance allows the viewer a retrospective journey to the old-time carpas. Inside the dimly lit canvas theater, a female singer, dressed in distinctive Sevillana attire, performs a tango and a seguidilla. Elated at what he sees, Polito fails to notice a gendarme standing right behind him. His friends however, managed to escape the fascination of the show and hide from the officer. This comedic gesture reproduces and confirms reports concerning the surveillance exercised over young children at the carpas.

In the next scene, the three children are singing the same tango they had heard at the carpa in front of an established theater, asking theater-goers for some coins in exchange. This gesture suggests not only that the kids learned the carpas repertory by peeping through the canvas each

---

573 Flamenco dancers from Sevilla, in the region of Andalucía, used this typical dress. In the Mexican context, this dress was an unequivocal marker of the Spanish national identity.
night but, most importantly, that they have now made the choice to turn their talents into a profession. The same uninterrupted tango establishes a temporal continuity transitioning the viewer to a grown-up Adriana, now singing in a carpa theatre in 1937. The theater is clearly distinct from the modest canvas jacalón they visited as kids. The presence of scenery and the upgraded, elevated stage are two clear indicators of this evolution. Carmelo and Polito enact two pelados, and accompany Adriana’s song on their guitars. The number is followed by a comedic choreography in which the two clumsy men try to lead Adriana into dancing the tango. Following this, a different woman appears on stage singing a typical Andalusian song. In the closing number, Polito and Carmelo perform an agile and witty comedy sketch in their respective roles as the pelado and the gendarme. They argue about the pelado’s disobedience to the authority, while the pelado complains that the officer did not let him finish singing his corrido nor his bolero.

Occasionally, to the sides of the stage, we see the theater’s manager: a formally dressed entrepreneur who smiles, satisfied at the laughs of the audience that are the sonic marks of the success of his show. Not only the visual cues, but also the musical repertory in this brief scene distinguishes the two epochs of carpa history, while also connecting them as two parts of an evolving tradition. Adriana’s tango seems to pay homage to the “old school,” as does the Andalusian song, while Polito’s and Carmelo’s mention of the corrido and bolero contextualizes this show in the 1930s, when the project of modern Mexico was beginning to achieve full force.

The conflict of the story centers on Adriana’s talent and how her pursuit by a handsome and ambitious entrepreneur with better artistic plans for her awakens the fierce jealousy of Polito. The moral dilemma revolves around two seemingly incompatible alternatives: to opt for the authenticity and camaraderie of the carpas, or to abandon them in exchange for a life of success and fame in the mainstream entertainment industry. The story bears a close resemblance to Moreno’s biography; at the same time, he had already made the crossover from the carpas to the big screen. This film may thus
have served as a nostalgic moment of reflexivity, through which Moreno seems to offer an apologetic explanation to his faithful followers in the carpas-jacalones for his success and transformation into a star. In the course of the coming years he would become an entrepreneur and a powerful union leader, who mingled with influential (and sometimes corrupt) politicians.

**Wave of Nostalgia for the Carpas**

It was during the decade of the 1980s that a sudden wave of nostalgic memorializing for the carpas became apparent in literature, museums, radio programs and phonographic compilations. These nostalgic recollections, taking place years after the fact, offer interesting examples of the retrospective construction of poorness within the carpas. The discourses and narratives that some songs and performance styles elicited from music historians and commentators are clear examples. The cuplé song “Mal Hombre” is a case in point.

Recorded in Los Angeles in 1926 by cuplé singer Elisa Berumen and Leroy Shield on the piano, the song “Mal Hombre” tells in the first person the tragic story of a young woman betrayed by her lover. The rhythm of this cuplé is classified as “tango habañera.” Fitting its dramatic lyrics, vocally this song has a distinctive nasal quality, explainable if one considers that the microphone was a very recent technology in 1926. (Listen to sound example 5). It is probable that singers and actors of this period of transition to amplification preserved some of the vocal techniques with which they were trained. Because a nasal vocal quality is more penetrating and can carry across noisy environments, it would have facilitated audibility in live performances in both big and small theaters. Furthermore, Berumen’s voice is produced through the technique called “head voice,” a technique said to enhance the feeling of vibrations in the head of the singer. A “head voice” is better suited for the higher register of the singer’s tessitura and has the effect of a “deeper”, or “fuller”
timber. Since Berumen sings indeed in her highest register, her voice is endowed with a cry-like quality. Another distinctive feature of her performance is the elongated dramatic vibrato at the end of each verse. This performatric element was probably meant to convey the indignation caused by the moral offense committed by this “mean man.”

The poetry is organized in hendecasyllabic (11-syllable) verses, while the piano maintains the rhythmic pattern of the habañera, thus giving clarity, fluency, and firmness to the narrator’s accusations. A subtle rallentando at the end of each strophe directs the listener’s attention to the despicable actions of the ‘mal hombre’ of the title. The rhythmic changes in the chorus section recuperate the original tempo, creating the effect of an accelerating pulse, while also giving the singer the opportunity to cry out loud her complaint, by rising to a higher pitch. These gestures allow her to perform her resentment to the audience. To me it seems that all of these performatric techniques corresponded to contemporary conventions for singing the sentimental tangos of those years.

Interestingly, in a radio program recorded in the 1980s and intended to memorialize the carpas, Jorge Miranda described this song as showcasing “the characteristic sound of the arrabal” (arrabal is an alternative term for barrios). In Miranda’s view, this tango lacked the characteristic “elegance” of the tangos performed in the 1920s but he is not clear in specifying the markers of that elegance. Therefore, he concludes, this tango is “arrabaleró”: which is to say, typical of the “arrabales” or poor barrios.574 It is possible that Miranda’s perception was shaped by historical narratives that connect these early tango songs with the imaginaries of the poor barrios of Buenos Aires and Montevideo. A second possibility is presented by the influence of Tejano singer Lydia Mendoza (1916-2007) who recorded this same song in 1934 and made it her signature hit. Mendoza performed at both sides of the Mexico–US border, accompanying herself with a 12-string guitar and

574 La música de nuestro México, Radio program Instituto Mexicano de la Radio, Num 68. “Las carpas”: (4’40”-8’54”), (FN08010135071).
eventually becoming the first “Queen of Tejano Music.” Her voice was “revered as the voice of the working class,” most likely as a result of her closeness to the communities of Mexican American workers in San Antonio, Texas.\textsuperscript{575} Therefore, Mendoza’s popular rendition of this song may have conditioned Miranda’s retrospective perception of Berumen’s performance as “typical of the arrabal.”

Accurate or not, discourses of this kind ended up inscribing the last memories of the carpas. It was during the 1980s and early 1990s that the stars of the carpas’ second period were interviewed, and their artistic merit finally acknowledged before they passed away. Since then, a melancholic air has tended to hang around all memories of the carpas, regardless of the period to which they pertain. Pedro Granados’ book, written in the 1980s, has served as the principal reference for all subsequent stories told about the carpas. He closes his narration with a regretful remark lamenting the disappearance of the theaters in favor of the growth of the city:

The Carpa, poor mother of the true Mexican theater, has died. Her rich sons have forgotten her. The reverence paid by so many pioneers of Mexican theater cease to exist due to the exigencies of the growth of our great city, the once beautiful “City of Palaces.” Modernism, the traffic, the new avenues and highways, do not let one single carpa to be set in any street. It is almost outrageous.\textsuperscript{576}

The not coincidentally capitalization of the word carpa, and the metaphor he employs, imply the elevation of this artistic manifestation to the ranks one of the most respected figures within the Mexican idiosyncrasy: the selfless Mother. The sentimentalism of Granados’ words portrays her as a forgotten and deceases woman who, despite her unyieldieng efforts has never been fully recognized. With this, the poorness of the carpas was reified as the mark of their truthful lineage and remained imprinted as an indelible attribute.

\textsuperscript{575} The Best of Lydia Mendoza, CD 536.

\textsuperscript{576} “La Carpa, madre pobre del verdadero teatro Mexicano ha muerto. Los hijos ricos la han olvidado. El venero de tantos y tantos pioneros del teatro mexicano dejó de existir por las exigencias del engrandecimiento de nuestra gran ciudad, la ex bella ciudad de los palacios. El modernismo, el tránsito, las nuevas avenidas, y los (ejes) “viales” ya no permiten que en las calles se instale una sola carpa, casi es denigrante.” Granados, Carpas de México, 142.
APPENDIX SECTION

Appendix 1

Map 1. 1926 annotated.

(See supplementary materials)
No. progresivo 1334. ACTA No. 145

Demarcación Categoría

En la ciudad de México, a los 23

díaz del mes de Mayo de 1921, a las 6:30 de la Tarde

encontré en la casa denominada

Emilio F. Uranga situada en la

Plaza de Armas, siendo

su propietario, D. Uranga,

y su encargado, D. Galves,

que no tenía programa delito.

Haciendo constar esta infracción en presencia del Gendarme No. y notificada al exonerado para que no alegue ignorancia del contenido.

El Gendarme No. El Inspector,

Testigo, Testigo,
Appendix 3

Transcriptions of contracts for Benefit shows presented to the Ayuntamiento Office

All these contracts are filed in AHDF- SDP Vol. 810, File 1562.

It is with great pleasure that I accept to take part in the show that will be offered for the benefit of my dear friend and colleague María Luisa Zapino, on the 10th of this month, in the portable theater Cardenti, settled in the Plazuela de San Sebastián.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cap Angelotte</th>
<th>Chaplin y su ratón</th>
<th>Carlos Sugrañes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mari Cardenti</td>
<td>Car Lanide</td>
<td>Zacarías Hernandez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manuel L. Aguilera</td>
<td>Illegible de luz</td>
<td>Navarrete</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>María Barreira Kakama</td>
<td>Guadalupe Villalón</td>
<td>Estrella Llorens</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Rodríguez B.</td>
<td>Niña Mercedes Villalón</td>
<td>Margot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>José Muñoz Pepino</td>
<td>Antonio García</td>
<td>Carlos Rodríguez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illegible Fanilo</td>
<td>Alfonso Hernández</td>
<td>“Charles”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herman Vera?</td>
<td>[illegible]</td>
<td>Cruz Roberto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alfonso G. de Moguel</td>
<td>G. E. Trigos</td>
<td>La Reina Luserito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delfina Carlso</td>
<td>Trio Trovatore</td>
<td>Humberto Carmona</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alberto Villegas</td>
<td>Hermanos Areis</td>
<td>Guillermina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>María Luis la Granadina</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Brothers Hre.
We are pleased to communicate to you that with all certainty you can consider us in the shows that will be put in your benefit on Wednesday 15 in the theater María Guerrero.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Caballero Robert [Aka. Conde Bobby]</th>
<th>Alas</th>
<th>Charles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Li Ho Chang</td>
<td>A Muñoz</td>
<td>Llorens Zacarías</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carlos Sugrañes</td>
<td>Jose ???</td>
<td>Alfonso Esparza Oteo,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cucho Rodrigues</td>
<td>Duetto Cubano</td>
<td>Pareja Butterfly</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

577 “Acepto gustoso en tomar parte en la función a beneficio de mi querida compañera y amiga María Luisa Zapino el día 10 de los Corrientes en la Carpa Portatil Cardenti instalada en la plazuela de S. Sebastian.”

578 “Señores Hermanos Hre. H Trovatore Frm. Muy señores míos: Tenemos el gusto de comunicarles a ustedes que con toda confianza pueden (considerarnos?) en la función del Miércoles 15 en el Teatro “María Guerrero” en beneficio de uds. E Uds. Affirmos SS.”
Benefit for Carlos Sugrañés:
With this we commit ourselves to work in the benefit that will take place Friday 17th, of this month in the theater Alcazar. (México February 16th, 1922).  

Li Ho Chang  
Caballero Robert  
Rosalindo de Dios: trio Yucateco  
Hnas Olguín: Ángela y Tamara Olguín  
Isauro S. López  
Dueto Cubano Zacarías [Zacarías Álvarez]  
Troupe Rolando  
Charles Ro

February 16th, 1922.
With this I commit myself to assist to the show for the benefit of Mr. Luis Vadillo and Hernán Vera, which will take place Friday 17th of this month, with the participation of:

María Barreira  
KLKLMh  
María I. Zapino  
José G. Muñoz  
María del Rosario León  
María Cardenti  
Delfina Castro  
Francisco Aldama  
Alfo. G. de Miguel  
Alamejo. G (?).  
Ramón Carti  
F. Balameares (?)  
Hector Herrera (Chino)  
Herrera, acaso?)  
Arnaldo Cornejo P.  
Marieta y Olga B. Aguirre  
Peña Duñaz  
[Firma]  
Guadalupe Suarez  
José Muñoz  
[Illegible]  

With this we manifest that we are willing to lend our personnel in your benefit that will take place Wednesday 19th of March, in the Movie Theater Monte Carlo of this city.
Yours, we sign attentively, SS.

579 “Beneficio de Carlos Sugrañes: Por la presente nos comprometemos a trabajar en su beneficio que se verificará el viernes 17 del presente en el teatro Alcázar. (México 16 de Febrero, 1922).”

580 “Febrero 16 de 1922. Por la presente me comprometo a asistir a la función de Beneficio de los señores Luis Vadillo y Hernán Vera, el cual tendrá verificativo el viernes 17 del presente mes, tomando parte en dicha función.”

581 “Por la presente manifestamos a ustedes que estamos dispuestos a prestar nuestro contingente, en su función de Beneficio que el miércoles 19 de marzo se verificará en el Cine Monte-Carlo de esta ciudad. De Uds. Afmos.. atentos Ss. Ss.”
I happily accept to take part in the show for the benefit of our friend and colleague Car Angelotti, which will take place in the portable Carpa Cardenti, and to leave proof I sign below.\(^{582}\)

As a gift to Dorita Coprano who celebrates her benefit show in the theater María Guerrero next Friday, I commit myself to participate with my varieties number. Similarly, Gloria Nardi commits her self, and to leave proof we sign.\(^{583}\)

Mexico March 2, 1922.
With this we commit ourselves to work for the benefit to take place in the Film Theater Mina, Friday March 3, 1922.\(^{584}\)

\(^{582}\) “Acepto con gusto tomar parte en la función a Beneficio de nuestro compañero y amigo Car Angelotti que se verificará en la carpa Portátil Cardenti y para que conste firme la presente.”

\(^{583}\) “En obsequio a Dorita Coprano que celebra su beneficio en el teatro María Guerrero el próximo viernes me comprometo a tomar parte con mi numero de variedades, también de la misma forma se compromete Gloria Nardi y para que conste la firmamos.

\(^{584}\) “México 2 de Marzo 1922. Por la presente nos comprometemos a trabajar en el beneficio que se efectuará en el cine Mina el viernes 3 de marzo de 1922.”
We undersigned happily accept to take part in the benefit of our dear colleague Mary Cardenti, that will take place Friday 3 of March, 1922 in the portable theater Cardenti, installed in the Plazuela de San Sebastian.  

Car Angelota
Familia Pagela de Gálvez
Loza Kummop
Parunxkie
“Colombina”

Charles
La mexicanita
Angelita Calderón
León

Manuel Aguilar
Ofelia y Los Sotomayor
Zacarías
César Morales
“La chiquita”

I happily accept to accept to take part in the benefit of our colleague Juan Cardenti, and I commit myself to attend said benefit show, which will take place Friday March 10th, 1922. In the carpa Cardenti, located in the Plazuela de San Sebastian. To leave proof we sign:

Mario Barreira Kakama
César Morales
Mary Cardenti
Romero Galvez
G Monóz
Cho Luza

Jonito
Clementina y Olivia
Por mi hija Antonia, Rafael
Berenum
B. Parunckle

Saúl Talavera
Calavaron
[otras tres firmas con nombres ilegibles]

Troupe Rolando,
Our dear Mr. With this, it is my pleasure to manifest that with all pleasure we will lend our personnel for the show for your benefit that will take place in the Theater/film-house Rialto on the 13th of this month. Yours attentively,

Casimiro Torres Pirrín
La encantadora Marujita
Pequeña estrella de couplet

Gervasio Bolaños
Zacarías Hernández
Plutarco Salgado

---

585 “Aceptamos con gusto los abajo firmantes tomar parte en el beneficio de nuestra apreciada compañera Mary Cardenti al cual tendrá verificativo el viernes 3 de marzo de 1922 en el teatro portátil Cardenti instalado en la Plazuela de San Sebastián.”

586 “Acepto con gusto tomar parte en el beneficio de nuestro compañero Juan Cardenti y me comprometo a asistir a dicho beneficio que tendrá verificativo el viernes 10 de marzo de 1922 en la carpa Cardenti situada en la Plazuela de San Sebastián Para constancia firmamos.”

587 “Troupe Rolando, Presente. Muy señores nuestros, Por la presente me es grato manifestarles que con todo gusto prestarremos nuestro contingente en la función que a beneficio de ustedes se verificará en el Teatro-cine Rialto el día 13 del actual. Sus afímos y atentos y ss. Ss.”
Mexico March 13\textsuperscript{th}, 1922.
My dearest Sirs,
It is my pleasure to manifest that with all pleasure we will lend our personnel for the show for your benefit that will take place in the film-house MonteCarlo of this city, Thursday 16\textsuperscript{th} of this month, Yours attentively.\textsuperscript{588}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{lll}
Por el cuarteto Galaz de & Rafael Díaz &  \\
Trovadores Yucatecos & Eva Beltri &  \\
Jose Baran Kelly & E Frunance &  \\
Palacio & Elena Vargas & \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

We undersigned, artists living in this city, commit ourselves to work in the benefit of LA GRANADINA, Friday 17\textsuperscript{th} in the carpa-theater “Jesús Torres” installed in the Plazuela de la Alhóndiga. Mexico March 16\textsuperscript{th}, 1922.\textsuperscript{589}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{lll}
Trueppe [sic] Rolando & Federico Palancases &  \\
S. Franciocili & Rosa Soto &  \\
Bella Margot & José Valdez &  \\
Elvira Vargas & Enriqueta Martínez &  \\
Clementina y Olivia & [And other illegible signatures] & \\
Chelito Criolla &  & \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

We are in the best disposition to attend the show for the benefit of our colleague Cacama that will take place in the portable Theater Cardenti, Friday 17\textsuperscript{th} of this month.\textsuperscript{590}

\begin{center}
\begin{tabular}{lll}
Marianela y Toni & César N Morales & Donoso Sebastian &  \\
Mario Barreira & Luis Romero & Angelita Calderón &  \\
KAKAMA & Mary Cardenti & I sign with salary; Emil y &  \\
María Zapino & Delfina Castro, & Rodríguez &  \\
José Muñóz Pepino & Las Richil & Señorita Elvira Vargas (Bella &  \\
Rosa Zarco & Antonia Berumen & Coralito &  \\
Gonzalo Delfín &  &  & \\
\end{tabular}
\end{center}

Dear Miss,

\textsuperscript{588} “México 13 de Marzo de 1922. Familia Turicn, Presente. Muy señores nuestros:
Por la presente me es grato manifestarles que con todo gusto prestaremos nuestro contingente en la función que a beneficio de ustedes se verificará en el Cine Montecarlo de esta ciudad, el jueves 16 del actual. Sus afmos y atentos y ss. Ss.”

\textsuperscript{589} “Los que abajo firmamos, artistas residentes en esta ciudad, nos comprometemos a trabajar en el beneficio de la GRANADINA el viernes 17 en el teatro carpa “Jesús Torres” instalado en la Plazuela de la Alhóndiga. México 16 de marzo de 1922.”

\textsuperscript{590} “Estamos en la mejor disposición de acudir a la función de beneficio de nuestro compañero Cacama que se verificará en el teatro portátil Cardenti el viernes 17 del presente.”
It is a pleasure for me to manifest that with all pleasure we will lend our personnel in the show for your benefit and which will take place in the film-house Montecarlo, Wednesday 29th of this month.\textsuperscript{591}

Leopoldo Beristain  
María Cruz José Padín  
Carmen Delgado  
Del Martínez  
Guillermo Rosas  
E Bonilla Bailarina con su

María de Camacho  
Juan C Durand  
Irma Guzmán  
Josefina Noriega  
Palancars  
Los Sotovereh

It is a pleasure for me to manifest that with all pleasure we will lend our personnel in the show for your benefit and which will take place in the Theater/film-house RIALTO Friday 31, of this month.\textsuperscript{592}

Virginia Barragán  
Guadalupe L. del Castillo  
C. Peredea  
Celia Durán Etelvina Rodríguez

Carlos Pardavé  
Carmen Galé  
Panlmo Acevedo

With this, the undersigned, commit ourselves to work in the show for the benefit of our colleague, Guillermo Urrieta, which will take place in the afternoon and evening of the 7th of this month, Mexico April, 1922.\textsuperscript{593}

María Zappino Pepino  
Mary Cardenti  
Charles Mario Bareiro Kakama  
María Cruz  
Juan Cardenti  
Manuel Aguilar

Clementina y Olivia  
Ofelia y Sotomayor  
Benigno Rodriguez  
[illegible signature]  
Luis Romero Pica Pulgas  
Gonzalo Delfín

\textsuperscript{591} “Presente. Estimada señorita. Por la presente me es grato manifestarles que con todo gusto prestaremos nuestro contingente en la función que a beneficio de ustedes se verificará en el Cine Montecarlo el miércoles 29 del actual.”

\textsuperscript{592} “Por la presente me es grato manifestarles que con todo gusto prestaremos nuestro contingente en la función que a beneficio de ustedes se verificará en TEATRO CINE RIALTO, el viernes 31 del actual.”

\textsuperscript{593} “Por la presente, los que a la vuelta firmamos se comprometen a trabajar en la función de beneficio de nuestro compañero Guillermo Urrieta (Guillermín) que tendrá lugar en la tarde y noche del viernes 7 del presente México Abril 1922.”
México April 7th, 1922.
The undersigned artists commit ourselves to take part in the show for this date in the carpa-theater “La India Bonita”, located in the Plazuela de Garibaldi.594

Manuel Rangel        Luis Romero           Josefa “la Mexicanita”
Miguel Argumedo       Eruyuda Pérez         Amparo Pérez
Salvador Sanchez      Concha Bustamante     Arturo Ávila
Fernando Jiménez      Enriqueta Monjardin

With this we commit ourselves to attend the benefit show for Mr. Luis Vadillo, that will take place Friday; April 7th, 1922.595

M Zappino            Mary Cardenti Secundino  Salvador Albanés Pastor
“Pepinito”           Nájera                H. Vera
Ofelia Pereira       Por la Murga           Guillermín
Amelia Wilhelmy       [firma ilegible] Ponilo  Ofeliz y Sotomayor
Galvez               Olga y Lidya Rubí

April 9th, 1922
Mr Hernán Vera.
With this we commit ourselves to work in your benefit show that will take place Monday 10th of this month, in the carpa Minerva, installed in the 6th street of Mesones with Las Cruces.596

R. Galvez            Cuarteto Galvez
Carlos Rodríguez     Pareja Aguirre

594 “Los artistas que suscribimos por la presente nos comprometemos a tomar parte en la función de esta fecha en el Teatro carpa “La India Bonita” situada en la plazuela de Garibaldi.”

595 “Por la presente nos comprometemos a asistir al beneficio del Sr. Luis Vadillo, que tiene verificativo el Viernes 7 de Abril del 1922.”

596 “Abril 9 del 1922. Sr. Hernán Vera. Presente. Por la presente nos comprometemos a trabajar en su beneficio que se efectúa el lunes 10 del presente en la carpa “Minerva” instalada en la 6ta de Mesones con Las Cruces.”
Varieties that are formally committed to take part in the benefit for Mr. Rosas in the carpa IDEAL, Friday 31<sup>st</sup> of this month, México April, 1922.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>María de Camacho</th>
<th>Carcuha Farfán</th>
<th>Aguilar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H Durand</td>
<td>P. Vadillo</td>
<td>Fay Fay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aldama y la Música</td>
<td>Hernán Vera</td>
<td>Debora Cello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexicana</td>
<td>Blanca Peola</td>
<td>Angel Rabamar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Ilegible] “The Liar”</td>
<td>María Zappino y pepinito</td>
<td>Caballero Richard.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The undersigned commit ourselves to work in the show for the benefit of Mr. Carlos Rodríguez, which will take place on the 21<sup>st</sup> of this month, in the portable theater “Minerva”. México April, 20<sup>th</sup> 1922.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M. Aguilar</th>
<th>José G. Muñóz</th>
<th>[illegible signature]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ramiro Galvez</td>
<td>Mary Cardenti</td>
<td>Señor Sugrañez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C.F. Ferrín</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

597 “Variedades que se comprometen formalmente a tomar parte en el beneficio del Sr. Rosas en la carpa IDEAL el viernes 31 del presente. México Abril de 1922.”

598 “Los que suscribimos nos comprometemos a trabajar en el beneficio del Sr. Carlos Rodríguez que tendra verificativo el día 21 del presente en el teatro Portatil Minerva.” México, 20 de Abril de 1922.”
Appendix 4
Map 2 Antigua y Nueva Nomenclatura
(See supplementary materials)

Appendix 5
Map 3 - 1900
(see supplementary materials)

Appendix 6
Map 4 - Plano Central 1881
(see supplementary materials)

Appendix 7
Map 5 - Directorio commercial
(see supplementary materials)
Appendix 8

Couplet de la Regadera
From the zarzuela Alegre Trompetería

Music by Vicente Lleo
Script by Antonio Paso
Premiered in Madrid, October 14th, 1907
Sung by María Conesa,

Tengo un jardín en mi casa
que es la mar de rebonito;
pero no hay quien me lo riegue
y lo tengo muy sequito
Aunque no soy jardinera
y me cansa el trabajar,
por la noche, aunque no quiera,
yo lo tengo que regar.

Al levantarme, y al acostarme,
lleno de agua, la regadera
y con las faldas, muy recogidas,
lo voy regando,
de esta manera.

Ahora este macizo,
 luego esta ladera,
 un par de chorritos,
 en la entre…dadera.
Pero me fastidia
tener que regar,
pues acabo hecha una sopa,
y me tengo que mudar.

No encuentro ni un jardinero
y es el caso extraordinario,
Entre tanto caballero,
no hay ninguno voluntario. ¿No?

No se asuste si le invito,
a que venga a trabajar
porque como es tan chiquito
tiene poco que regar.
Y si hay alguno, que al escucharme,
gustoso acepta mi regadera,
yo te aseguro, que en dos lecciones
sale regando, de esta manera.

Eche usté un chorrito, en estos jazmines.

I have a garden in my house,
beautiful as [it is big] the sea
But there is not one to water it,
and I have it very dry, oh!
And although I am not a gardener,
And I get tired of working
At night, even if I don’t want to…
I have to water it

When I get up, and when I go to bed
I fill my watering can
And with my skirt lifted up
I water it,
Like this

Now, this [tick] bush,
then this slope,
and a pair of trickles
to the creeper plant
But it annoys me
to have to water,
because I end up soaking wet,
and then I have to change… my… clothes…

I don’t find a gardener,
And it is extraordinary
Among so many gentlemen
Is there any volunteer? No?

Don’t be afraid,
If I invite you to work
Because it is very small
And you will have to water a little bit
And, if there is someone who, listening to me, accepts my watering can,
I assure you that in two lessons
Ends up watering like this.

Shed a trickle to these jasmines

366
¡Cuidadito, pollo, con los calcetines!
Pero me fastidia, tener que regar
porque acabo hecha una sopa,
y me tengo que mudar”

¡Hey, be careful with the socks!
But it annoys me
to have to water,
because I end up soaking wet,
and then I have to change… my… clothes…
Appendix 9

9a. Photo “Children watching a Carpa show in a Carpa de barrio” SINAFO- Inv. 375397
(Niños Observando una Función en una Carpa de Barrio)

9b. Photo. “Children in a fence at a carpa theater.” SINAFO, Inv. 375396;
“Niños en un Barandal en una carpa”
9c. Photo “Woman with a baby at carpa Bombay.” SINAFO Inv. 375442.
(“Mujer con Niño en Brazos en la Carpa Bombay”)

![Image of a woman holding a baby in a carpa]

369
Señora: Muy buenos días padrecito,
    como lo está su merced
¿Cómo lo pasó la noche
de salud, como está usted?
Padre: Muy bien hija, muchas gracias.
Señora: Yo te lo vengo avisar
    que mi hija María Chetita
ya se lo quiere casar
Padre: ¿Y con quien va a ser la boda?
Señora: Con el hijo de tío Cleto,
    con el muchacho Colás.
Quieren que lo haya repiques,
que lo cante el monaguillo,
que lo toque el chirimía
y también el tamborío.
Padre: Todo se hará, sí señora
pero un festejo tan grande
le cuesta mucho dinero
Señora: Ay padre, te lo soplico
que no lo seas tan carero.
Yo te lo daré un gallina
con diez pollos y un faisán,
Un pato y un guajolote
más grande que el sacristán
Padre: Animales no permito
se pongan en el altar
Cincuenta pesos la boda
es lo que te ha de costar.
Señora: Válgame el señor de Chalma
    y la corte celestial,
Toma pronto el dinerito
ya lo puedes empezar
Padre: Muy bien, que pasen los novios (¡Vivan los novios!)
y que el sacristán comience
luego, luego a repicar (suen a música)
Vivan los novios!

(Suena la música)
Andenle pronto muchachos ya se nos van a casar…

(Campanas)
Superpuesto, suena (Conesh conesh paneshé)
Novio: Por fin te llegó el día
de que lo seas mi mujer,
Ya lo verás Mariquita,
como te lo he de querer.
(Ya lo verás Mariquita,
como te lo he de querer)
Novia: Yo siento mucha vergüenza,
yo no lo quiero casar
Novio: No se seas tonto, la muchacha,
no te lo hagas del rogar.

Padre: (Siéntense )Hínguense pronto hijos míos que el acto va a comenzar

En “latín”- Dominos godiscus di titiritorum casamiento de indiorum tamalorum apestorum, per omnia seculor seculorum

Segunda Version:
Oremos: Casamientoorum indiorum apestorum,
Musicorum, atragantorum molorum tamalorum, per Omnia seculo seculorum

Notar el cambio contundente de la homilía. Se excluye la mención a los títeres. Se reemplaza por sólo la mención al casamiento, la música y el mole

Amen!
Padre: Para siempre están unidos,
ya se pueden retirar
(suenen campanas y chirimías)
Señora: Muchas gracias padrecito
te lo convido a bailar
Padre: Iré por allá hijos míos
¿qué es lo que me van a dar?
Señora: muchos tamales y pulque,
lo pasaras a tomar
Padre: Pues bien, íos hijos mios,
Benditos de Dios están,
¡Vivan los novios!
Novio: Ay que gusto tengo Mariquita,
ya lo eres mi mujer.
¡Viva el padrino!
¡A doña Bartola!

Suena banda de aiento (verificar qué tipo de son es)
¡Vivan los novios!,

(Rosales: viene la segunda parte)

Casamiento de Indios, segunda parte

Señora: Ya lo viene el comitiva
y la mesa no está puesta
Que nos dirá la madrina,
¿qué no lo tienes vergüenza?
Tráétele pronto el polquito
¿pos qué te los has hecho Petra?

Petra: pero está todo dispuesto
sólo falta que lo venga
José Antonio con Orquesta
(se escucha risa)
José Antonio: Ya estoy aquí madrecita
con el señor del trombeta,
El que lo rasca con tripa
y el que toca la vihuela

Señora: Cuando me lo vas cobrar
por tocarlo en la fiesta
José Antonio: Pos por ser para ti madre
tecuesta doce pesetas

Señora: Nada más eso? Pus anda
que te lo pague tu abuela!
Si quieres tocar en fiesta
lo comes hasta que quieras
lo bebes hasta revientas
José Antonio: No te lo enojes madre,
tu pagarás lo que quieras!

Señora: Pos tóqueme un …
y que comience la fiesta!
(Comenta la gente)
Yo voy a bailar con el novio,
y yo con la novia.

Parejas

(suena … )
Vivan los novios!
Ay que bonito!

Que cante, que cante (el novio)

Novio: Bueno, voy a cantar
Canta un ….

Una indita en su chinampa
Andaba cortando flores,
El indito entro a su oreja
Le decía de sus amores.
(Canta algo que parece en Tarasco o Purépecha).
Tarindé titriumpa
Tarindé prima mapecha
La comanepa,
Quiquirihuí, quiricahui

(Suena Diana)
Alguien: Ya lo estarás muy contenta,
¿no es verdad María Josefa?
Novia: Si yo no digo que no,
sino que mi da vergüenza,
(es que lo tengo vergüenza)

¡Que brinde el padrino!

Padrino:
Pos yo brindo por Colás y por Josefa
porque de viejos sean
él nahual, ella una bruja
que lo anden por la azotea
Pa’ que la gente se alegran,
que nos toquen un jarabe
los señores de la orquesta.
Colás, tú con la madrina,
tu Padrino, con Josefa
y yo que lo tengo gusto
lo bailare con tu suegra
de ahí en fuera que cad’ uno
que pepene su pareja

(Suena un jarabe)
¡Vivan los novios!

¡Vivan los padrinos!
¡Vivan los suegros!
Appendix 11

El gendarme y el pelado

Label: Víctor 46052-A
Performer: Contreras y Carrillo

Pelado: ¡Ábranse jijos del aire que ya viene el huracán!
Gendarme: : Acompáñeme amigo
P: ¿En qué tono va a cantar?
G: Que me acompañe le digo, chistosote.
P: ¡Ah Dios!, ¿y por qué?
G: Por faltas a la moral, por faltas a la policía, por faltas a…
P: Pos faltas a la verdad, ¿cuándo le he agredido?
G: ¿Que le cuele le digo!
P: Si no soy cedazo.
G: jalele jalele,
P: Ni que fuera mula.
G: Ándele pa’ la oficina,
P: pues si yo no soy empleado, a qué voy a la oficina!
G: Ándele, ándele,
P: No me empuje, no me empuje, que yo soy del barrio de los meros sombrereros,
G: ¿Y dónde es eso?
P: La colonia de la bolsa,
G: Uuuh, pus si somos vecinos,
P: ¿Y usted de dónde es?
G: De Tepito,
P: A mi no me pita nada,
G: ¡Ora si me lo llevo!
P: Espérese hombre, no ve ‘ora es usted el que me agrede.
G: ¿Cómo le agredo?
P: A como será atascado, no se dice agredo. ¡Agradable!
G: ¿Pos cómo le agrade?
P: En la yunta,
G: Bueno, camine o le pito
P: ¿Qué también es músico?,
G: No me esté tanteando que le doy con la macana
P: Si, pero no la ensalve
G: Ora, ora, camínele,
P: No me lleve, le doy un tostón que traigo
G: Que eche pa’ lante le digo
P: No sea malo, le doy un peso
G: jalele o le sueno,
P: pos ni que juega pañuelo
G: ándele pa’ la comisaría
P: no sea mala riata, no me perjudique, le doy cinco pesos
G: cinco qué?
P: Cinco trompudos, óigalos nomás tronar.
G: Hay que vecinito este, pos pa’ qué anda escandalizando. Bueno váyase,
P: Pos hasta luego,
G: Oiga, a ver
P: A ver, ¡a los toros!
G: Ora cáigase
P: Como quiere que me caiga si to’via no soy cadáver
G: Que se caiga con los cinco pesos,
P: cinco pesos, cinco burros lo corretien y el más grandote lo alcance
G: Pos entonces pa’ que anda ofreciendo,
P: Pos por tantear
G: Pos ora si me lo llevo, jálele
P: No vecino, si es de broma
G: Qué broma ni que chihuahuas, jálele!
P: No me lleve, oiga, oiga la última palabra
G: ¿Qué quiere?
P: si me deja libre, le invito su tequilazo y le amenizo la copla con una cantada,
G: ¿cómo que me amenaza?
P: Amenizo! no sea güey! Gerundio pluscualperfecto del gerundio amenizar
G: pos vas, y si quiere yo le rasco,
P: ¿Qué me rasca?,
G: La guitarra
P: Gracias, no me cuadra que me la hagan de armonía
G: Pues éntrele de una vez
P: Ahí le va la crenolina!

Canción:
Violín, cello, flauta

Ni a ti ni a mí ni a uste, nos dejan de molestar,
Ni tu ni yo, ni aste, nos debemos de asustar
Tibi-ribi-ribi- ribi,…

Dicen que por tu amor, que me tienen que matar,
eso es de puro ardor, yo no los voy a buscar.
Tibiribibi…

Se me hace que esos dos, solo es frijol de oruga,
que en el primer hervor toditi-ti-to se arruga

Tibiribibi..
(con risa paródica en contrapunto)
Olalla, Mateo y Patarreta

From the Zarzuela "Los Campesinos"
Music by Leo Fall
Lyrics by Miguel Mihura Álvarez
and Ricardo González

Tiempo de Marcha-Moderato

A de lan te  sin te mor  co moen nues tra  ca sa
Yo no pue do  de tem blor  de cir qué me  pa sa
Olalla, Mateo y Patarreta

De tu cielo gran Dios, ten goya cien cia
Pe ro en tre mos por fa vor va yau na pu len cia

Aun que so mos ma ru si fios ma ru si fios me dan ganas de llo
Aun que so mos ma ru si fios ma ru si fios me dan ganas de llo
Aun que so mos ma ru si fios ma ru si fios me dan ganas de llo
Olalla, Mateo y Patarreta

57

por que ha si do siem pre
mues tras i lu sio nes en con trar leen es tees tao con ten toy

74

ad mi ra o

Yo le voy aho ras bus car quoes toy im pa ciem le

ad mi ra o

Le de be mos es pe rar
Olalla, Mateo y Patarreta

(va a tocar el timbre del velador y no se atreve)

(Hablado)

¿Los dos!

¡Ah!

que naturalmente suena

si fós ma ru

¡Ah!

Zu lá

¡Los dos!

¡Ah!

¿Lo hago yo?

¡Ah!

Aun que so mos ma ru si fós ma ru

(fuerte)
Olalla, Mateo y Patarreta

si fós me dan ganas de llorar al ver al niño
Y me duen las puntas ríllas cos qui

f

Pues y yo de lae mo

Y yo tengo corazón sol tanto de ser o
Olalla, Mateo y Patarreta
Appendix 13
Un circo de barrio

Rosales y Robinson,
Con la Banda de artillería de México,
Septiembre, 1908.

Director: Que salga Rodimini
Todos: ¡Sí, sí, que salga!
Rodimini: Hola señor director, muy buenas tardes.
Director: Buenas las tenga el señor Rodimini.
¿Por qué no ha venido usted a saludar al respetable público?
Rodimini: Porque estoy convaleciendo.
Director: ¿Convaleciendo?, y de qué enfermedad
Rodimini: Pues de un mal que a todos nos aqueja
Director: Pero usted está soñando, yo no he estado enfermo.

Rodimini: ¿Sí?, pues yo voy a probarle que no se alivia todavía
Director: Hombre, hombre, venga la prueba.
Rodimini: Allá va, señor director, présteme usted veinte pesos.
Director: Veinte pesos? pues no los tengo.
Rodimini: Ja ja ja ja ja,  Ya ve usted como todos somos víctimas de la ranquítis aguda,
Director: In convalescence? And from which illness?
Rodimini: An illness that affects us all.
Director: You must be dreaming? I have not been ill.
Rodimini: Really, haven’t you? I will demonstrate to you that you have and are not cured yet.

Director: Es verdad, estoy convencido.
Todos: ¡Viva Rodimini!
Rodimini: A ver Michael Paganini, un poco de armonía
Canta:
Quietecito, quitecito                     (8)
se quedaba el señorito,                     (8)
al oírse le decía                         (8)
ay que bruja padrecito!                  (8)
Empezaré a criticar (7)

Conductor: May Rodimini come to the stage
Todos: Yes, yes!
Rodimini: Good afternoon Mr. Conductor
C: Good afternoon Mr. Rodimini! Why had you not come to greet the audience?
R: Because I am in convalescence
C: In convalescence? And from which illness?
R: An illness that affects us all.
C: You must be dreaming? I have not been ill.
R: Really, haven’t you? I will demonstrate to you that you have and are not cured yet.
C: Ok, show me.
R: Ok Mr. Conductor, please lend me twenty pesos.
C: Twenty pesos? No, I don’t have them.
R: Ha ha ha ha! you see? We are all victims of acute meagerness, illegitimate child of chronic scarcity.

C: oh! That’s true I am convinced of it!
Every one: Long life to Rodimini!
R: Ok Paganini: a little bit of harmony, please.

Still, still
The mister stayed
When listening he would say
Oh! … dear priest!
I will start by criticizing
del género masculino, (8) The masculine gender, if by talking I find
si al hablar yo me fascino (8) my self fascinated
bien me pueden dispensar (7) You can forgive me
no se vayan a enojar (7) Don’t be mad
nadie de los señoritos (8) For none of those misters
los que andan muy prendiditos (8) Who dress very nicely
van a presenciar su ensaye (8) We can see their attempts
pues los he visto en la calle (8) because I have seen them on the streets
quietecitos..

Vemos muchos patriecitos (8) We see many of them
que les gusta enamorar, (7) Who like to conquest
sin saber los pobrecitos (8) Without knowing, poor little things,
de nadita trabajar, (7) Nothing about work,
si se llegan a casar (7) If they happen to marry,
y faltan los señoritos, (8) And they fail,
y todos sus pequeñitos (8) And all their children
gle dan de vestir el pan (7) Give them dress and food
yacen todos y se van (7) They all lay
a pasear muy (7) And go out
Quietecitos.
(4)

( +4 )

Pero apurar hermosas niñas, (9) Hurry up beautiful girls
Que os persiga juntitito (8) Because he is following you closely
de bigote cortitito (8) With his small moustache
cual ponzoñoso alacrán (7) Like poisonous scorpion
averiguar con afán (7) Find out with interest
si es conveniente el partido (8) If he is a convenient suitor
y si sólo es un perdido (8) And if he is just a lost
borrachón elegantito (8) Drunken, elegant little man
decidle : aquí no pegó!, (7) Tell him: “here you are loosing your time!
laírguese ya (4) Go away!

Quietecito…
(4)

Still…

En fin bellas señoritas, (8) Anyways, beautiful ladies,
no quiero seguir hablando (8) I don’t want to keep talking
porque me está amenazando (8)
un catrín de ratoncitos, (8)            Because a catrín of Little mice
Si cometo algún delito (8)                Is threatening me
por decir lo que es verdad (7)            If I commit any crime
defiendan por caridad (7)                   For having said what is true
a este pobre payasito, (8)                defend with charity
pues si me pega el catrín (7)              this poor Little clown,
me dejará: (4)                              because if the catrín beats me

Quietecito… (3)                                he will leave me

Still
Allá en la penitenciaría
Ladrillo llora sus penas
cumpliendo injusta condena
aunque mato en buena ley

Los jueces lo condenaron
sin comprender que Ladrillo
fue siempre buen sencillo
trabajador como un buey

Ladrillo esta en la cárcel
el barrio lo extraña
sus dulces serenatas
ya no se oyen mas
los chicos ya no tienen
que siempre moneditas
les daba al pasar

Los jueves y Domingo
se ve una viejita
llevar un paquetito
al que preso esta
de vuelta la viejita
los niños preguntan
Ladrillo cuando sale,
solo Dios sabrá

El día que con un baile
su compromiso sellaba
un compadron molestaba
a la que era su amor
jugando entonces su vida,
en duelo criollo Ladrillo
le sepulto su cuchillo,
partiéndole el corazón

Ladrillo esta en la cárcel
el barrio lo extraña
sus dulces serenatas
ya no se oyen mas
los chicos ya no tienen

In the jail
Ladrillo cries his sorrows
Paying his sentence
Although he killed fairly

The judges condemned him
Without understanding that Ladrillo
Was always good
Hard working as an ox

Ladrillo is in jail
The barrio misses him
his sweet serenades
are no longer heard
The boys don’t see
their dear friend
Who always handed them
Some coins as he passed by

Thursdays and Sundays
An old lady can be seen
Carrying a little package
To him who is in prision
When she comes back
The children ask
When will Ladrillo be out?
Only God knows

The day when with a dance
He got engaged
A guy bothered
[Ladrillos'] love
Risking his life
In criollo duel, Ladrillo
Stabbed his knife
Breaking his heart in two

Ladrillo is in jail
The barrio misses him
his sweet serenades
are no longer heard
su amigo querido
que siempre moneditas
les daba al pasar

Los Jueves y Domingo
se ve una viejita
llevar un paquetito
al que preso esta
de vuelta la viejita
los niños preguntan
Ladrillo cuando sale,
solo Dios sabrá.

The boys don’t see
their dear friend
Who always handed them
Some coins as he passed by

Thursdays and Sundays
An old lady can be seen
Carrying a little package
To him who is in prison
When she comes back
The children ask
When will Ladrillo be out?
Only God knows
Appendix 15

Attenti Pebeta (1929)

Letra: Caledonio Flores
Musica: Ciricaco Ortíz

Cuando estés en la vereda
y te fiche un bacanazo,
vos hacete la chitrula
y no te le deschavés;
que no sepa que estás lista
al primer tiro de lazo
y que por un par de leones
bien planchados te perdés.

Cuando vengas para el centro,
caminá junando el suelo,
arrastrando los fangullos
y arrimada a la pared,
como si ya no tuvieras
ilusiones ni consuelo,
pues, si no, dicen los giles
que te has echado a perder.

Si ves unos guantes patito, ¡rajales!;
a un par de polainas, ¡rajales también!
A esos sobretodos con catorce ojales
no les des bolilla, porque te perdés;
a esos bigotitos de catorce líneas
que en vez de bigote son un espinel…
¡Atenti, pebeta!, seguí mi consejo:
yo soy zorro viejo y te quiero bien.

Abajate la pollera
por donde nace el tobillo,
dejate crecer el pelo
y un buen rodete lucí,
comprate un corsé de fierro
con remaches y tornillos
y dale el olivo al polvo,
a la crema y al carmín.

Tomá leche con vainillas
o chocolate con churros,
aunque estés en el momento
propiamente del vermut.
Después compras un bufoso y,

When you're on the sidewalk
and a bigwig gawks at you,
play stupid
and don't give him any notice;
Don't let him figure out
that you fall easy on the first try
and that at the sight of a pair
of ironed trousers you give in.

When you come downtown
walk looking down,
drag your shoes a
nd stay close to the wall
as if you didn't have
any wit and needed no comfort,
otherwise the fools will think
you had gone bad.

If you see gloved hands, vanish fast!
or a pair of gaiters, vanish as well!
To an overcoat with fourteen buttonholes
don't pay any attention, just get lost!
To those thin mustaches like fourteen
dashes that look more like a fishing
line… Careful, babe! – follow my advice:
I'm an old fox and I wish you well.

Lower your hem
to your ankle,
let your hair grow
and make it into a bun,
buy an iron corset with rivets
and screws
and forget about powder,
cream or lipstick.

Drink milk with vanilla
or chocolate fritters,
even when it’s really time
for cocktails
Then buy a gun
cachando al primer turro,
por amores contrariados
le hacés perder la salud.

and to the first sucker you catch,
on account of distressed love
make him lose his health.
Appendix 16

Caballo Criollo

Música: Guz Águila / Germán Bilbao
Letra: Fernando Ramírez Aguilar (Jacobo Dalevuelta)

Tango mexicano grabado por Juan Pulido en 1929 y prohibida su difusión y venta por el gobierno de Emilio Portes Gil

Cuando partió tu pampero
en su caballo criollo
con su guitarra española
y su manta del Perú

When your pampero went away
In his criollo horse
With his Spanish guitar
And his mantle from Peru

tal vez ya nunca, pampera,
saldré a besarte al camino
voy a luchar por Sandino
allá en Nicaragua,
que tal vez ya nunca, pampera,
saldré a besarte al camino
voy a luchar por Sandino
allá en Nicaragua,

Perhaps never pampera,
I will come to kiss you in the way
I will go to fight for Sandino
There, in Nicaragua,

Así dijo tu pampero,
tu pampero payador
y el beso te dio postrero,
entre lágrimas de amor
el último beso, frenético y largo
quedóse en tu boca,

your pampero said like this
your payador pamper
and gave you the last kiss
among tears of love
the last kiss, frantic and long
stayed in your mouth,

mas dulce que amargo...
más dulce que amargo...

Así dijo tu pampero,
tu pampero payador
y el beso te dio postrero,
entre lágrimas de amor
el último beso, frenético y largo
quedóse en tu boca,

mas dulce que amargo...
más dulce que amargo...

Perhaps never pampera,
I will come to kiss you in the way
I will go to fight for Sandino
There, in Nicaragua,

Así dijo tu pampero,
tu pampero payador
y el beso te dio postrero,
entre lágrimas de amor
el último beso, frenético y largo
quedóse en tu boca,

Así dijo tu pampero,
tu pampero payador
y el beso te dio postrero,
entre lágrimas de amor
el último beso, frenético y largo
quedóse en tu boca,

Perhaps never pampera,
I will come to kiss you in the way
I will go to fight for Sandino
There, in Nicaragua,

Quedó solo tu cotorro
y en la pampa murió el sol
y entre el polvo del camino
se alejó tu corazón
y sólo el galope, lejano, perdido
quedó en el latido de tu corazón...

Alone was he left
And at the pampa the sun died
And in the dust of the way
Your heart went away
And the gallop, lost in the distance
Stayed in your heartbeat

Quedó solo tu cotorro
y en la pampa murió el sol
y entre el polvo del camino
se alejó tu corazón
y sólo el galope, lejano, perdido
quedó en el latido de tu corazón...

Alone was he left
And at the pampa the sun died
And in the dust of the way
Your heart went away
And the gallop, lost in the distance
Stayed in your heartbeat

Caballo criollo, corre veloz
lleva a la gloria mi corazón
pero no vuelvas nunca sin él,
caballo criollo, muere tú también.

Criollo horse, run fast
Bring glory to my heart
But never come back without him
Criollo horse, die as well

Caballo criollo, corre veloz
lleva a la gloria mi corazón
pero no vuelvas nunca sin él,
caballo criollo, muere tú también.

Criollo horse, run fast
Bring glory to my heart
But never come back without him
Criollo horse, die as well

Esperando a tu pampero,
sola, una tarde de mayo
te trajeron su caballo
que muy triste te miró
parece que te decía
de sus ojitos el brillo
"él se murió por Sandino"

Waiting for your pampero
Lonely, in a May afternoon
They brought his horse
And very sad, he looked at you
As if its sparkling eyes
were saying
“he died for Sandino”
allá en Nicaragua,
que quieren libertad".

Así cayó tu pampero,
tu pampero payador
que el beso te dio postrero,
entre lágrimas de amor,
el último beso, frenético y largo
quedóse en tu boca,
más dulce que amargo...

Poco a poco su caballo
de tristeza se enfermó
y una tarde en el camino,
galopando se murió
y sólo el galope, lejano, perdido
quedó en el latido de tu corazón...
Caballo criollo, corre veloz
lleva a la gloria mi corazón
pero no vuelvas
nunca sin él caballo criollo,
muere tú también.

Pero no vuelvas nunca sin él
caballo criollo, muere tú también...

there in Nicaragua,
where they want freedom”

That’s how your pamper fell
Your payador pamper
who gave you the last kiss
among tears of love
the last kiss, frantic and long
stayed in your mouth,
sweeter rather than bitter

Little by little, his horse
was sick of sadness
And one afternoon, in the way
Galloping he died
And the gallop, lost in the distance
Stayed in your heartbeat
Criollo horse, run fast
Bring glory to my heart
But never come back without him
Criollo horse, die as well

But never come back without him
Criollo horse, die as well
Mal hombre

Era yo una chiquilla todavía,
cuando tú casualmente me encontraste
y a merced a tus artes de mundano
de mi honra el perfume te llevaste.

Luego hiciste conmigo lo que todos
los que son como tú con las mujeres,
por lo tanto no extrañes que yo ahora
en tu cara te diga lo que eres.

Mal hombre,
tan ruin es tu alma que no tiene nombre.
Eres un canalla. Eres un malvado.
Eres un mal hombre.

A mi triste destino abandonado
entable fiera lucha con la vida,
ella recia y cruel me torturaba
yo más débil al fin caí vencida.

Tú supiste a tiempo mi derrota,
mi espantoso calvario conociste.
Te dijeron algunos: "Ve a salvarla."
Y probando quien eras, te reíste.

Mal hombre,
tan ruin es tu alma que no tiene nombre.
Eres un canalla. Eres un malvado.
Eres un mal hombre.

Poco tiempo después en el arroyo,
entre sombras mi vida defendía.
Una noche con otra tú pasaste,
que al mirarme oí que te decía:
"¿Quién es esa mujer?" "¿Tú la conoces?"
"Ya lo verás", respondiste,
"una cualquiera".
Y al oír de tus labios el ultraje
demostrabas también, lo que tú eras.

Mal hombre,
tan ruin es tu alma que no tiene nombre.
Eres un canalla. Eres un malvado.
Eres un mal hombre.

"Who is that woman?" "Do you know her?"
"Soon you will see", you replied,
"she's a nobody."
At the hearing from your lips the abuse,
you were showing again, what you were.

Cold-hearted man,
your soul is so wicked it has no name.
You are despicable. You are evil.
You are a cold-hearted man.
Appendix 18

Moralidad en las carpas de Barrio

Morality in the carpas at the barrio
Carpa de “Martínez de la Torre” donde se exhuma el couplet de 1917 y recoge sus lauros póstumos la tiple que llenó con su recuerdo nuestros insomnios juveniles. Refugio del tedio popular que se resuelve en inocentes bromas familiares y en estridente ‘puzzle’ de chalinas dominicales y ‘overoles’ teñidos por Ribera.

En el foro de guignol, un artista inédito trazó un telón de boca con un boceto que Ramos Martínez atribuiría al pincel de María Lorencin, y en la sala nocturna los reflectores rebeldes emulan los intentos eléctricos del teatro Ulises.

Don Chon desarticula un Charleston que se ha escapado a la pupila vigilante de Campillo, mientras el violín aumenta el africanismo de la música yanqui, en notas que pueden dar la clave de su invento a Julián Carrillo.

¿Quién aconsejaría a la señora provecta del vestido color pizarra el abandono del hogar mesocrático para cantar tonadillas de Martínez Abades?

Su figura de profesora de bordado nos revela toda una existencia gris entre macetas de suérfacillas, canarios parleros y acompañamientos de pedal en la máquina de dos cajones que ya sabe los secretos del tru-tru y de los plisados.

Esa niña carirredonda y hoyuelada, imita con poca fortuna las tembladeras de nuestra Lupe Velez en los “sabats” del Lírico y canta con sujeción al estilo de los jacalones doloridos. Su “Barba Azul” que principia con entonaciones de himno crepuscular en parroquia pueblerina, está salpicado de recitados gatunos acusadores de una observación precoz a través del calvario de las barracas de feria. No se qué melancolía deja en el ánimo esa muñeca de trapo color de rosa que se vendió hace diez años en las jugueterías del portal. Es una litografía iluminada del México...
viejo…
(7) La coquetería maestra de la mujer que fue ídolo de la tanda barata, tiene el encanto de las flores marchitas en un libro de amor. Bajo los bordados del jarano, sus ojos dicen la más amarga novela de bastidores.

(8) En el silencio del barrio en penuria, su voz tiene resonancias extrañas y entre los tablones mal unidos de la carpa se adivina un reflejo de luz violeta, como si ardiera en su interior el alcohol de una lámpara decimonónica.

(9) Las familias de la Mosqueta y la Magnolia han llevado al teatrillo sus galas domingueras. Hay botas altas con punteras de charol, abrigos felpudos con adornos de plata, perfume de peluquería con música para bailes y cogotes rasurados en forma de media luna con aplicaciones de polvo de arroz que deja en la piel un ton morado…

(10) El muchacho astroso del magnavoz con pinceladas de ocre y bermellón en el rostro, invita a las siluetas de la calle a que vean los prodigiosos bailes de Chon y los nuevos números de la estrella en eclipse. Un charro que toma hojitas en el puesto cercano saborea el cigarillo de hoja entre la lana del poncho y una pareja de novios que pasó la tarde en el jardín de Santiago, penetra la carpa entre arrumacos un poco burdos…

(11) A pesar del frío y del silencio, entran los espectadores en fila compacta… la carpa es el corazón del suburbio… Pasa una carretela quejumbrosa – la última que resta en la ciudad con su auriga dormido y encorvado…

(12) Se escucha desde fuera cada vez más mecánico el cantar: “Se llamaba Juan Español…”

(13) Carpa Martínez de la Torre… Entre tu parroquia demócrata, vaga haciendo notas el espíritu atormentado de Toulouse Lautrec… Tienes el dolor de la pobreza en las pupilas sin luz de tus cantadoras, en el baile…

(7) Master coquetry of a woman who was the idol of the cheap tanda, she has the charm of wilted flowers pressed in a love-story book. Underneath the embroidered jarano hat, her eyes tell of the bitterest backstage novel.

(8) In the silence of the destitute neighborhood her voice has strange resonances, and between the unevenly nailed floorboards of the carpa, is glimpsed a glimmer of violet light, as if a 19th-century alcohol lamp were burning within.’

(9) The families of Mosqueta and Magnolia streets have brought their Sunday garments to the small theater [teatrillo]. There are high heeled boots with patent lather points, furred coats with silver ornaments, barbershop perfumes with dance-hall music and jowls shaved in the shape of a half-moon with applications of rice powder that leave a purple tint on the skin.

(10) The ragged little boy with the megaphone, with ochre and vermilion brushstrokes on his face, invites those silhouettes in the streets to the prodigious dances of Chon and the new numbers of an eclipsing star A charro drinking tea in a nearby stall savors his cigar underneath the wool of his poncho, and a couple who spent the afternoon in the Santiago garden, walks into the carpa with slightly lewd snuggles.

(11) Despite the cold and the silence, the audience comes inside in a compact line… the carpa is the heart of the suburb… A plaintive horse cart –the last in the city— crosses the street with its sleepy and hunchbacked charioteer…

(12) The song “Se llamaba Juan Español…” is heard from outside, more and more mechanical-sounding…”

(13) Carpa Martínez de la Torre… through your democratic parish wanders taking notes the tormented spirit of Toulouse-Lautrec… You have the pain of poverty in the lightless
polvoso de tus histriones y en el decorado exiguo realizado frente a una vela de accesoría, en la que tiemblan de frío y de abandono los diez muchachos anémicos del pintor de afición.

pupils of your singers, in the dusty dancing of your actors and actresses and in the meager decorations made by candle-light in a basement-apartment in which tremble, cold and abandoned, the ten anemic boys of an amateur painter
SOURCES

Archives

Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal (AHDF)
- Sección de Diversiones Públicas
- Licencias en la Vía Pública
- Vagos

Museo Archivo de Fotografía (MAF)

Sistema Nacional de Fototecas (SINAFO)

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI)

Mapoteca Manuel Orozco y Berra, General Collection

Strachwitz Frontera Collection of Mexican American Music

Fonoteca Nacional

Government Publications

Memorias del Ayuntamiento

Anuario de Estadística

Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas 1894

Reglamento de Teatros 1894 (with amendments 1913)

Periodicals

Revista de Revistas, 1920-1930

El Imparcial, 1910

El Tiempo, 1910

El Universal Ilustrado, 1928

El Universal, 2011, 2013

El Popular, 1932

El Nacional, 1936

Revista Secuencia, 1993
Discography and Audio records

Archivo Histórico: Crónica de la Gran Ciudad de México. (Serie Testimonial) Disco Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos México. (AMEF T-44-04)

“La Gatita Blanca” LP. Serie documental Grabaciones Históricas- Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos. Serie Cultural AMEF–03

México 1900- Abrego y Picazo y Rosales y Robinson. Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos. (AMEF T-44-04)

Esta y la otra por un solo boleto: las carpas en México, Asociación Mexicana de Estudios Fonográficos, (1984)

“Casamiento de Indios” (Columbia C150)

“Casamiento de Indios” (Victor 63236-A)

“Las Carpas” Tiempo de Recordar No.5, Instituto Mexicano de la Radio

“The Best of Lydia Mendoza, CD 536.

Films

Viaje Redondo (1919)

Águila y Sol (1937)
WORKS CITED


Azuela de la Cueva, Alicia. *Arte y Poder : renacimiento artístico y revolución social México, 1910-1945.*


Gómez, José Antonio. Variaciones sobre el tema del jarabe mexicano, 1841. Print.


Kurlat, Frida Weber. "Sobre el negro como tipo cómico en el teatro español del S. XVI." *Romance


Monsiváis, Carlos. "Notas sobre cultura popular en México." *Latin American Perspectives* 5.1, Culture


