

SOL, SOMBRA, Y MEDIA LUZ: HISTORY, PARODY, AND IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE MEXICAN AMERICAN *CARPA*¹

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Abstract

This paper analyzes a parody of the tango "A media luz" that was performed by Rodolfo García, a Mexican American comedian who worked in his family's tent show, the Carpa García, in the early 1940s. I argue that by juxtaposing the generic conventions of the tango with those of the canción ranchera and by introducing carnivalesque humor, Mr. García's parody articulated a distinctly local Mexican American identity which was strongly linked to a sense of working-class masculinity. In this way, the parody highlights the class- and gender-based contradictions that were inherent in ongoing processes of Mexican American identity formation at mid-century.

Keywords: popular theater, genre, greater Mexico

1. Introduction

In examining the relationship between verbal art and ethnic identity, many of the papers in this volume have found themselves drawn to consider the complex ways in which ethnicity interacts with other discourses of identity. My own analysis of a song parody from the repertoire of Rodolfo García, a Mexican American tent show comedian from San Antonio, Texas, will continue in a similar vein. Drawing on Charles Briggs' and Richard Bauman's recent theory of genre (1992), interviews conducted in 1990 and 1997 with Mexican American vaudeville performers, and recent writings in Chicana/o ethnography and historical sociology, I will focus on the manipulation of generic conventions within Mr. García's parody. I argue that this intertextual play highlights the class-, and gender-based contradictions that were inherent in ongoing processes of Mexican American ethnic identity formation in mid-century.

This analysis is based on the idea that social categories like class, gender, and ethnicity are emergent phenomena, products of ongoing processes of interaction between

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people. It is also based on an understanding of performance as a communicative frame that holds up the formal aspects of messages for self-conscious reflection and evaluation on the part of interactants. As the enactment of the poetic function of language, performance draws attention to the generic conventions and social understandings that underlie communicative practice (Hymes 1975; Bauman 1978). Of course, such reflection on and evaluation of messages does not take place in a social or historical vacuum. Indeed, as Briggs and Bauman have observed, when interactants deploy particular varieties of discourse, they place themselves with respect to the social histories and associations of those varieties. It is through these indexical relations that local understandings of larger processes are constructed and reconstructed in performance. This is especially true of parodic performances like Mr. García's, which by definition place the formal aspects of some original in ironic half-light.

2. Carpa, teatro, and the actor cómico

Mr. García came of age as a performer in the early 1940s in southern Texas and worked with his family's carpa ('tent show'), the Carpa García. The climax of his career coincided with the twilight of Spanish-language commercial theater in San Antonio and the rest of southern Texas. From the late nineteenth century through the second half of the twentieth, San Antonio numbered among the major centers of the United States' burgeoning live Spanish-language entertainment industry. Melodrama, *zarzuela* (Spanish operetta), and especially vaudeville flourished on the city's Mexican-American stage, while *mexicana/o* circuses of various sizes made San Antonio their base of operations (Kanellos 1990). Of all these cultural forms, one of the most enduring and beloved was the traveling carpa or "tent show." In greater Mexico, this term is and was applied to almost any sort of entertainment that takes place in a tent, and everything from melodrama to vaudeville to second-run films has appeared in such venues. But in southern Texas, the word "carpa" has most often been applied to small, travelling variety shows, many of which were centered on a family unit. From the theater's beginnings in San Antonio until the period just after World War II, these shows entertained Mexican American audiences all over Texas and the southwestern United States with a mixture of circus acts and vaudeville (Ybarra-Frausto 1984). Although competition from films and, later, television, rendered the *carpa* commercially unviable in the United States by about 1950, the spirit of rough humor that the form embodied would later re-appear in the explicitly activist theater of the Chicano movement (Broyles-González 1994; Huerta 1982).

The *carpa* was a variety show, and as such, it juxtaposed and recontextualized various genres of speech, music, dance, clowning, acrobatics, and other types of performance. Between the opening *conjunto* (a chorus line on the *escenario* or 'stage') and the final *pantomima* (a short, sketch-like theatrical piece performed in the *pista* or 'ring'), an almost endless variety of acts appeared. Ventriloquists, mentalists, contortionists, pyrotechnics by a Chinese magician, knockabout clowning action, madcap sketch comedy, lachrymose romantic songs, wire-walking, and dizzying *maromas* ('somersaults/acrobatic maneuvers') on trapezes and parallel bars all combined to form a fast-paced heteroglot spectacle that celebrated its own disunity of style. Forms of verbal art employed in daily life, such as jokes, local anecdotes, and verbal duels shared the stage and ring with songs, dances, *declamación*, and production numbers, some of which were original to the *carpa*

companies themselves, and others of which were borrowed from the 'legitimate' Mexican-American stage, from 'folkloric' dance companies, and even from Mexican and U.S. made films. This sort of bricolage was the central (dis)organizing trope of the *carpa*, and it appeared not only on the level of the entire *función*, but also within the individual acts.

This juxtaposition and recontextualization of genres, along with the manipulation of intertextual relations between forms, is especially salient in Rodolfo García's comedy. His onstage persona, don Fito or "*el bato suave*," ('the cool dude') represented "a typical wise guy from the streets of West Side San Antonio" (Kanellos 1990: 102), and used liberal doses of the *pachuco* language (cf. Barker 1970) to enhance his streetwise image. This character was a local version of the *pelado*, a Chaplinesque comic hobo figure which had a family resemblance to the bawdy *hermitaño* of the greater Mexican shepherd's play (Flores 1995; Briggs and Bauman 1992) and to the versifying clown of the Mexican circus (María y Campos 1939). Unlike these precursors the *pelado* was and is identified specifically with the urban underclass and taken to be a symbol of national identity. In the thought of elite Mexican authors such as Octavio Paz (1985) and Samuel Ramos (1962), the word "*pelado*" referred to an urban ruffian whose vicious, barbaric masculinity betrayed the inherent pathology in the Mexican psyche (Limón 1994; 1998). But in the popular theater, and especially in the hands of actors such as Cantinflas, Tin Tan, and Resortes, the *peladito* type (note the addition of an affectionate diminutive) became a beloved, sympathetic figure on both sides of the border. Still a symbol of national identity, he became a scrappy underdog who symbolized the urban Mexican everyman's struggle to survive (Monsiváis 1988).

Mr. García's character adapted this second, celebratory discourse of Mexican working-class masculinity to the South Texas context, where the figure was no less controversial. In its theater reviews, *la Prensa*, a prominent Spanish-language newspaper that represented the voice of San Antonio's *mexicano* elite, had long linked the stage incarnation of the *pelado* to negative stereotypes of Mexicans in the Anglo media, calling the figure "a discredit for those who do not know Mexico" (Kanellos 1990: 82). It is perhaps for this reason that Mr. García tends not to use the words *pelado* or *peladito* to describe his character, referring instead to himself and his stage persona by the professional title "*actor cómico*" ('comedian'). By any name, characters like don Fito were a source of endless amusement for rural and urban working-class audiences in southern Texas. Stumbling on stage in mismatched rags, clownlike makeup, a messy wig, and an unusually long tie, he engaged the audience and the show's master of ceremonies in an exuberant exchange of jokes, local anecdotes, and racy double entendres.

“Rodolfo García as Don Fito. Photograph courtesy of the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio and Rudy García Jr.”



After a succession of such witticisms and a narrative joke or two, Mr. García would end his act with a song parody such as the following, accompanied by his brother Manolo on piano.

Example 1.

[A *medias copas* (parodia)²
por R. García circa 1940

1. Coyuya, sesenta y nueve
2. Y allí, tengo mi jacal
3. Por cama, tengo un petate,
4. Por almohada, un cajón;
5. Un sillón, mocho y chinchoso
6. Que la vieja me dejó.
7. En un clavo están colgadas
8. Unas enaguas chorreadas
9. Que la ingrata me dejó;
10. Un perro, flaco, amarillo
11. Que de pulgas me llenó

(estribillo)

12. Por esa ingratitud
13. Que no puedo olvidar,
14. Estoy a medias copas.
15. Me las voy a curar.
16. Ya a medias copas, yo
17. Recuerdo su traición,
18. Que triste y atontado
19. Por otro, me dejó.
20. Parrandas y borracheras
21. No sé lo que voy a hacer.
22. La culpa que me las ponga
23. La tiene esa infiel mujer.
24. No encuentro quién me consuele.
25. Sin camisa me quedé.
26. Los amigos ya no me invitan.
27. No hay quién me de una copita
28. Ni un vasito de aguamiel.
29. Sino al contrario, se burlan

Halfway drunk (parody, gloss)

- In the barrio, seventy-nine,
And there, I have my *jacal* ('hut').
For my bed, I have a *petate* ('reed mat'),
For my pillow, a crate;
A buggy, broken armchair
That the *vieja* ('broad') left me.
From a nail is hanging
A filthy, mottled slip
That the ungrateful woman left me;³
A skinny, yellow dog,
Who covered me with fleas.

(chorus)

- For that ingratitud
That I cannot forget,
I am halfway drunk.
I'm going to cure myself.
Now halfway drunk, I
Remember her betrayal,
Who left me stunned and sad
For another.
Carousing and drunkenness,
I don't know what I'm going to do.
The blame for my doing this
Belongs to that unfaithful woman.
I find no one to comfort me.
I'm left without a shirt.
Now my friends don't buy me drinks.
There's nobody to give me a little shot
Or a glass of *aguamiel* ('maguey-juice').
On the contrary, they jeer

² I thank Richard Flores, Jessica Montalvo, Nadjah Ríos, and Angélica Bautista for their close proof-reading of my translation of the parody and the original. I especially thank Susana Kaiser, whose knowledge of Buenos Aires revealed important details in the original that would have been unintelligible to me otherwise.

³ Some proofreaders have preferred that this word be translated as "ungrateful woman," while others have preferred "cruel woman." In any case, it is a verbal formula so strongly associated with the stereotype of the treacherous, ungrateful, cruel, conniving woman of the *canCIÓN ranchera* that it may point to all of these qualities.

30. Que mi vieja me hizo güey.

That my *vieja* made me a *güey*
(lit. "ox"/fig. "impotent fool").⁴

(estribillo)

31. Por esa ingratitud
32. Que no puedo olvidar,
33. Estoy a medias copas.
34. Me las voy a curar.
35. Y un consejo les doy
36. A los que oyendo están
37. Que esas viejas chorreadas
38. Les manden ... a bañar.

(chorus)

For that ingratitude
That I cannot forget,
I am halfway drunk.
I'm going to cure myself.
And I'll give some advice
To those who are listening
That they send those dirty *viejas*
... To take a bath.⁵

The text above is a transcription of a cassette tape recording that Mr. García made himself on his home tape recorder. At the end of our first interview in July of 1990, Mr. García handed me this tape, saying only that he wanted me to have it. The tape contains a long monologue, which Mr. García calls, after some hesitation, a "*reporte*" ('report'). He begins the *reporte* by discussing his career and his family's history of involvement in the performing arts. Midway through the tape, he begins to sing song parodies of popular songs that he once used to close his comic act. These song performances lead to other recollections and contextualizing comments. The above text is thus a demonstration performance, a stretch of discourse made into an artifact, raising issues of representation that I have addressed elsewhere (Haney 1998). Mr. García has never written "A medias copas" down, but its text changes relatively little from demonstration performance to demonstration performance. The above transcription, then, is probably a reasonable facsimile of what might have been sung before an actual *carpa* or nightclub audience - minus, of course, that audience's crucial participation in the performance.

Mr. García claims to have learned the parody from a published book from Mexico which is no longer in his possession. He also claims to have altered the parody's text to fit the tastes of his South Texas audience, both by replacing tabooed vocabulary with less offensive expressions and by changing unfamiliar expressions.⁶ The title and phrase "A medias copas," for example, is a transformation of "A medios chiles" (lit. "Halfway chiled"), whose figurative meaning is more or less the same thing as Mr. García's title but was less familiar in Texas than it was in Mexico. In addition to these changes, Mr. García also describes localizing his parodies in towns the *carpa* visited. Regarding "Chencha," a parody of a *bolero* titled "Desvelo de amor," Mr. García had this to say:

Esas son parodias - - - que vienen de la vida pública, de la vida real. Esas son palabras que éste platica así, "Oyes, fijate que éste dice de otro. Oyes, aquella muchacha se llama Chencha. Mire que éste que el otro." Y yo estoy agarrando lo que dijo éste, lo que dijo aquél. Y luego, yo lo compongo

⁴ In some performances of this song parody during interviews, Mr. García has brought his hands to his temples, with the first fingers pointing upward, as if to suggest horns, upon saying, "güey."

⁵ The pause in the middle of this line may lead some listeners to expect the sentence to end "... a la chingada" ('to fuck'), "al diablo" ('to the devil') or some other such expression. The actual ending of the sentence "los manden ... a bañar" ('send them ... to take a bath') frustrates this expectation.

⁶ I have as yet been unable to locate any such book or any other version of this parody. I cannot therefore say with any certainty how much Mr. García changed it and in what ways.

en esa parodia.

(These are parodies - - - that come from the public life, from real life. These are words that somebody says like this: "Listen, you know that so-and-so said such-and-such about somebody else. Listen, that girl's name is Chenchá. Look, [let me tell you] this and that," and I'm getting everything that this one says, and that one says. And then I work it into that parody.)⁷

In bars and other gathering-places, then, Mr. García would talk to locals, listen to their conversations, and incorporate material he encountered into his routines and sometimes into his parodies. The version of "*A medias copas*" that he recorded for me, however, seems to have little in the way of localizing detail.

"A medias copas" is a parody of a popular tango titled "A media luz," which I reproduce for reference.

Example 2.

A media luz (original)

por C. Lenzi y E. Donato 1925 (Romano 1989)

1. Corrientes tres-cuatro-ocho,
2. Segundo piso, ascensor.
3. No hay porteros ni vecinos,
4. Adentro cocktail y amor ...
5. Pisito que puso Maple,
6. Piano, estera y velador;
7. Un teléfono que contesta,
8. Una vitrola que llora
9. Viejos tangos de mi flor
10. Y un gato de porcelana
11. Pa'que no maulle al amor.

(estribillo)

12. Y todo a media luz,
13. ¡Que brujo es el amor!
14. A media luz los besos
15. A media luz los dos
16. Y todo a media luz.
17. Crepúsculo interior,
18. ¡Qué suave terciopelo
19. La media luz de amor!

20. Juncal doce veinticuatro,
21. Telefoneá sin temor;
22. De tarde, té con masitas,
23. De noche, tango y cantar;
24. Los domingos, té danzante,
25. Los lunes, desolación.

In half-light (original, gloss)

- Three-four-eight Corrientes Street,
 Second floor, the elevator;
 There are no custodians or neighbors,
 Inside, cocktails and love.
 A little flat, furnished by Maple.⁸
 A piano, a mat, and a nightstand;
 A telephone for answering,
 A victrola that weeps out
 Old tangos of my youth.
 And a cat made of porcelain
 So that it won't meow at love.

(chorus)

- And all in half-light,
 What a wizard love is!
 In half-light the kisses,
 In half-light, the two of us.
 And all in half-light,
 Interior twilight,
 What soft velvet,
 The half-light of love

- Twelve-twenty-four Juncal Street
 Call without fear;
 In the afternoon, tea and pastries,
 At night, tango and song;
 On Sundays, a tea dance,
 On Mondays, desolation.

⁷ From tape PH90-8-1:1, on file at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio. For any analysis of "Chenchá," which exhibits a genre play similar to that of "A medias copas," see Haney 1996.

⁸ Maple is a prestigious furniture store in Buenos Aires.

26. Hay de todo en la casita,
 27. Almohadones y divanes,
 28. Como en botica ... cocó,
 29. Alfombras que no hacen ruido,
 30. Y mesa puesta al amor.

The house has some of everything,
 Like in a drugstore,
 Great cushions and divans ... cocaine,
 Carpets that don't make noise,
 And the table set for love.

(estribillo)

31. ¡Y todo a media luz,
 32. Que brujo es el amor!
 33. A media luz los besos
 34. A media luz los dos.
 35. Y todo a media luz.
 36. Crepúsculo interior,
 37. ¡Qué suave terciopelo
 38. La media luz de amor!

(chorus)

And all in half-light,
 What a wizard love is!
 In half-light the kisses,
 In half-light the two of us.
 And all in half-light,
 Interior twilight,
 What soft velvet (is),
 The half-light of love

Although there are important parallels between the parody and the original text, Mr. García has been reluctant to reflect upon them in interviews. When questioned about the original, he has stated that he knows the parody best and has only a passing familiarity with the original. These comments might suggest that the parody could stand alone, without comparison to the original text, and indeed, it has probably done so for many listeners. In analysis that follows, however, I will make much of the relationship between the parody and the original song. I argue that the transformations the parody effects on the original song, as exemplified by Mr. García's version, are emblematic of its implicit commentary on the tango itself and the history of that form's use in southern Texas. To explain how this is so, it will be necessary to detail not only how, by whom, and for whom, the tango was performed and received, but also to examine the historical and social locations of the *carpa* and its audience.

3. El lado sombra: Teatro and its audience

The heyday of commercial theater in San Antonio coincided with dramatic changes in the social, economic, and political situation of *mexicanos* in southern Texas. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1930s, commercial farming dominated by Anglo settlers had progressively replaced the older ranching economy, bringing significant changes in productive relations. Native-born *tejanos* were forced to become wage laborers, and new immigrants fleeing the poverty and chaos of revolutionary Mexico added to their numbers. Drawn by the prospect of better-paying jobs and an escape from rural labor controls, *mexicanos* began migrating to cities like San Antonio and Houston (Montejano 1987: 217). The industrialization associated with World War II was one of the most important causes of this increasingly rapid urbanization of the *tejano* population, which had already begun in the 1930s (Peña 1985: 124-25). Furthermore, according to historian Richard García, the 1930s "served to separate and crystallize the Mexican community of San Antonio into three distinct classes - a small Mexican bourgeoisie, a developing Mexican petit bourgeoisie, and a vast Mexican working class" (1978: 24). Peña draws a similar, if slightly more complex, schema of classes and sees World War II as ushering greater stratification in South Texas as a whole (1985: 121). Whatever the key event may have been, it is clear that during the 1930s and 1940s, which is the period that Mr. García

and my other consultants seem to remember best, Mexican Americans in San Antonio and elsewhere were becoming increasingly divided along class lines. Richard García (1991) devotes considerable space to the ways in which *mexicanos* of various classes used expressive culture to promote their respective ideologies and to define and symbolize the divisions in their community, but he pays little attention to theater. My research suggests that the theater was an important symbolic arena in which an emerging *mexicano* public constituted its understanding of these processes.

In interviews with me, *artistas* who remember these times have spoken of a sharp status distinction between performers who identified with the *carpas* and those who identified with the *teatro*, the Spanish-language stage. Indeed, some interviewees who identify as *artistas de teatro* ('theater performers') have taken offense at being asked about, and by implication associated with, the tent shows. The late Leonardo ("Lalo") García Astol, one of the most accomplished actors of San Antonio's Spanish-language stage explained the situation to me as follows:

Bueno, carpas en San Antonio, verdaderamente se puede decir que yo no las conocí mucho, profundamente. Tenía yo ese . . . malentendimiento que había en que nosotros, los que éramos de teatro, exclusivamente de teatro, veíamos a los que trabajaban en las carpas como una cosa a un nivel más bajo de nosotros. Cosa que, al correr la vida, me di cuenta de que estaba yo perfectamente equivocado.

Well, one can truly say that I did not know the *carpas* in San Antonio very well, profoundly. I had that . . . misunderstanding that there was that we, those of us who were of theater, exclusively of theater, saw those who worked in the *carpas* as something on a lower level than ourselves. A thing which, with the passage of my life, I realized that I was perfectly wrong

Rodolfo García's comments to me and other interviewers have also reflected this stigma. In a 1987 interview with filmmaker Jorge Sandoval, Mr. García stated that although many *artistas de teatro* worked with his father's *carpa*, "muchos probablemente no quieren que los mencione ('many of them probably don't want me to mention them.')(Sandoval 1987: 4). These *artistas*, who had moved on to theater after starting their careers as *carperos*, did not want to be associated with the humble tent shows. In an interview with me, Mr. García criticized as pretentious those performers who ". . . nomás en el puro arte trabajan de una vergüenza de ir a trabajar con pico y pala" ('. . . just work as performers because they were ashamed to go to work with a pick and shovel').⁹ He stated somewhat defensively, as if responding to past criticisms leveled at him, that he had never suffered from such embarrassment; for his father had taught him to work "como los hombres" ('like a man'). These statements suggest that the *carpa* and performers associated with it bore a stigma in some circles, based in part on association with a working-class audience.

Indeed, the comments of these *artistas* on *carpa* and *teatro* recall the distinction between the *conjunto* and *orquesta* styles that emerged in Texas Mexican music during the same period. The *conjunto* was and is a small, accordion-centered band that became a symbol of the *mexicano* working class, while the *orquesta* was and is a large wind ensemble similar to American dance bands of the day that was associated with more assimilated middle-class audiences (Peña 1985). I would suggest that the theater-music analogy is useful, but also potentially misleading. Although the literature on the *carpa*

⁹ From tape PH90-8-1:1 on file at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.

unanimously in links the form with a proletarian audience in small towns and urban barrios, the Spanish-language theater cannot be exclusively associated with the middle class. One problem derives from simple demographics. *Carpas* and *tandas de variedad* flourished during the period before World War II, when the Mexican origin population of San Antonio was overwhelmingly poor and working-class. In such a community, no commercial theater that catered exclusively to an elite and middle class audience could have survived for long. In his studies of the popular theater, Ybarra-Frausto stresses the heterogeneity of the theatergoing public in the Southwest (1984: 55), the influence of working class *picardía* on the comedy of the 'legitimate' stage (1983: 46), and the fact that "working class origin was a reality that cut across generational and residence patterns" (1984: 56). It is clear, then, that the theaters were spaces in which various sectors of the *mexicano* public came together, but under whose terms? Don Lalo Astol's reflections, once again, suggested an answer. In our interview, after he had made clear the importance of the *carpa*/teatro distinction, I asked him about the differences between the two sets of venues.

LA: En aquellos tiempos, iba Ud. A un teatro, el público a ver un espectáculo.
Iba Ud. Con su corbatita, se sentaba Ud. En la luneta...

(In those times, you went to a theater, the audience, to see a spectacle. You went with your little tie, you sat in the front rows...)

PH ¿Muy fina?

(Very finely [dressed]?)

LA Sí Ropa bien presentada, muy serio, el público se sentaba a ver el espectáculo. En cambio, iba Ud. a una *carpa* con la camisa desabrochada, subía Ud. los pies encima...

(Yes, with well-presented clothes, very serious, the audience sat down to see the show. On the other hand, you went to a *carpa* with your shirt unbuttoned, you put your feet up...)

PH Mas informal, más corriente.

(More informal, more common.)

LA Informal. ¡Exactamente corriente! Informal completamente.

(Informal. Exactly common! Completely informal)

In his description of the *carpa's* atmosphere, Astol used the Spanish word "*corriente*" ('common'), which is often used to distinguish *la gente corriente* ('the common people') from *la gente decente* ('decent people,' "people of distinction'). Some reference to the class identity of the audiences was clearly intended. Note, however that Mr. Astol referred not to the actual composition of the audiences but to the styles of self-presentation that were characteristic of audiences in each set of venues. Elsewhere in the interview, he related his understanding of the similarities and differences between the spectacles presented in theaters and tent shows, focussing specifically on the different standards applied to language use.

PH: ¿Cómo eran diferentes las variedades que se presentaban en los teatros a los que se presentaban en las carpas?

(How were the variety shows in the theaters different from those that were presented in the carpas?)

LA: Bueno, venía siendo lo mismo, nada más que en un teatro, el artista tenía más soltura, más facilidad, más escenario mientras que en una carpa, era el espacio más reducido, con más dificultades. No se podía poner telones, cambiar escenografía, ni nada de esas cosas, y en el teatro sí pero artísticamente, no había ninguno.

(Well, it was about the same, except that in a theater, the artist has more freedom, more ease, more scenery while in a *carpa*, the space was more reduced, with more difficulties. One could not place curtains, change scenery, or any of those things, and in the theater, one could but artistically, there was no difference.)

PH: ¿Y los temas que se trataban?

(And the subjects that were treated?)

LA: Eso era lo mismo

(That was the same.)

PH: ¿Y la lengua que se usaba, en esos dos lugares, era lo mismo o era diferente?

(And the language that was used in those two locations, was it the same or different?)

LA: No exactamente, porque en el teatro, se tenía que hablar el español correcto.

(Not exactly, because in the theater, one had to speak correct Spanish.)

PH: ¿En el vaudeville también?

(In vaudeville too?)

LA: Sí, pero un español correcto, aunque hubiera una palabra mala, que no hay palabra mala si no es mal tomada. Pero si hubiera una palabra malsonante para el público, en el teatro se decía de una forma más . . . más correcta. En cambio, en una carpa, el artista se soltaba mucho, y decía las cosas con más picardía, más descarada. Vamos a decir que una palabra malsonante . . . se decía con más . . . suelto en una carpa.

(Yes, but a correct Spanish, even if there were a bad word, and there is no bad word if it isn't taken badly. But if there was a word that was bad-sounding for the audience, in the theater, it was said in a more . . . a more correct way. On the other hand, in a *carpa*, the artist let himself go quite a bit, and said things with more *picardía*, more baldly. Let's say that a bad-sounding word . . . was said with more . . . freely in a *carpa*.)

PH: ¿Más suelto?

(More freely?)

LA: Mas suelto, más . . . franco, le voy a poner un ejemplo. Sería una palabra que no es mala, pero . . . se ha tomado por mala: Pendejo, vamos a decir. ¿Sabes lo que es, verdad? La toman como una grosería en todas partes.

(More freely, more . . . frankly, I'm going to give you an example. It would be a word that isn't bad . . . but has been taken badly: "Pendejo," let's say. You know what it is, right? They consider it

a vulgarity everywhere.)

PH "Pendejo."

('Fool!')

LA: Pendejo. Bueno, en un teatro, decía Ud., "Éste es un . . . [suavemente] pendejo." Y en una carpa , "Ay, este ¡¡¡PENDEJO!!!" Me entiendes?

(All right, in a theater, you said, "This guy is a . . . [softly, with falling intonation] *pendejo*." And in a *carpa* , "Oh this *PENDEJO!!!*" Do you understand me?)

PH: Entonces, ¿se dice francamente sin concelarlo?

(So it is said frankly without concealing it?)

LA: Controlarlo. Éso era una de las diferencias que había entre *carpa* y teatro. El teatro era más retraído, más . . . respetuoso, vamos a decir. Y en la *carpa* , se soltaba uno más.

(Controlling it. That was one of the differences that existed between *carpa* and *teatro*. The theater was more restrained, more respectful, let's say. And in a *carpa* , one let oneself go more).¹⁰

Here, Mr. Astol's comments combine a concern with the appropriateness of tabooed vocabulary with a prescriptivist ideology of "correct" language. The term that seems to encapsulate his sense of correctness and appropriateness is "*respeto*" ('respect'). For *mexicanas/os*, this single term invokes core ethical and interactive values of decency, gentility, politeness, deference to elders, and "the responsible sense of self and others" (Limón 1994: 110). In Mr. Astol's view, *artistas de teatro*, showed their *respeto* for the *respetable público* by speaking "correct" Spanish and exercising a certain patrician restraint in their use of offensive vocabulary or subject matter. Audiences in the theaters were also expected to show a corresponding *respeto* towards the performers. Mr. Astol paints a picture of theatrical vaudeville as a refined amusement for serious-minded people of character, *la gente decente*. The *carpa*, with its unabashedly earthy humor and informal atmosphere was for the *gente corriente*.

The son of Socorro Astol, a prominent Mexican actress, and the half-brother of the famous comedian "Mantequilla," Astol comes from a long line of stage performers. He began his career in Mexico and moved to Laredo in 1921 to join his father in the Compañía Manuel Cotera. After a long career on the Spanish-language stage in San Antonio, he acted in Spanish language radio and television and for years hosted a show titled "El Mercado del Aire" on radio station KCOR (Kanellos 1990). Before our interview, he told me that during his years in the United States, he had not bothered to learn English well, preferring to concentrate on Spanish. He saw it as his mission to provide an example of good, correct Spanish for the *mexicanos* of San Antonio, most of whom, in his opinion were descended from uneducated peasants and spoke neither English nor Spanish well. Astol's opinions are quite representative of those of the exiled Mexican elite of San Antonio, who, according to Richard García, "clearly established and promoted a definite intellectual milieu of high culture . . . and a sensitivity to *mexicanidad* (as well as an example of correct diction and language that promoted, within itself, an ideology of formalism and elitism)" (1991: 104).

¹⁰ Ibid.

This group strove to cultivate appreciation for the fine arts in the West Side through such organizations as the Club Mexicano de Bellas Artes and the Grupo de Aficionados de Arte (102-103). Enjoyment of 'high' culture was thought to be a sign of being '*gente decente*,' and the ricos aspired to "raise" the cultural level of the community in which they lived. Astol, a Mexican-born artist, can be seen as an organic intellectual of this group. Whether or not he agreed with the Huertista politics of San Antonio's elite, he shared their expatriate mentality, their Mexican nationalism, and their concern for "civility, decency and elitism as contained in Mexican tradition and high culture" (147). The idea of *respeto* that he describes in the passage above is an application of their ideology of civic virtue, hierarchy, and formalism to the context of the theater, where it served to guide proper behavior, for both performers and audience members.

The attitudes towards proper conduct in the theater that Astol expressed in my interview echo those expressed in the Spanish-language newspapers of the early 20th century.¹¹ Kanellos notes that San Antonio's Mexican-American press sharply criticized the *pelado* figure as inappropriate for cultured audiences. Furthermore, he notes that Astol himself avoided using the word *pelado* to refer to his own character, don Lalo, opting instead for "comic hobo." By way of explanation, he hypothesizes that San Antonio's theatergoers may have been "more conservative and elite than the Los Angeles ones and/or the working-class Mexicans in San Antonio did not have as much power over the theater world . . . as in Los Angeles . . ." (Kanellos 1990: 83). Elizabeth Ramírez reproduces newspaper commentaries going as far back as the late 19th century which invoke the idea of "respect" for "families" in their condemnations of supposedly improper behavior in theaters, as the following example from San Antonio's *La fe católica* illustrates:

"[We] must censure harshly the discourtesy of some poorly educated people who without proper respect of any sort for the families, interrupted the performances by conversing in loud voices, laughing ridiculously and, what is more incredible, singing each verse during the choruses which even sheep herders would not do" (Ramírez 1990: 16. Translation by Ramírez).

The fact that the newspaper would need to censure such behavior with a disparaging reference to an occupation like sheep herding suggests that the elite editors saw the working sectors of the audience as a threat to standards of decency and decorum. Perhaps in response to such differences of esthetic and social standards, newspapers and performers promoted the theater as tool for teaching morality and proper behavior. Ramírez reports that the patriarch of the Villalongín company, for example, referred to theater as a "temple of instruction." She also notes that Mr. Astol had recalled reading lines that his father had added to the ends of plays to make the moral messages clear (Ramírez 1990: 126).

¹¹ In some cases, Spanish-language newspapers refer favorably to *carpas* such as the Carpa Sanabía, which presented melodrama and *zarzuela* in the early teens (Kanellos 1990: 100-101). I am assuming for this study that such "*carpas*" are not exactly the same thing as the small variety shows I am focusing on. Indeed, these newspaper articles point to problems with the use of the term "*carpa*." When I began my research on the subject, I assumed that *mexicanos* would use "*carpa*" in the same way that Kanellos, Ybarra-Frausto, and other authors use it, to refer to a small itinerant variety show that combined circus acts with vaudeville. However, during the course of my research, I often found myself being led down blind alleys by my consultants' uses of the term. I would contact people who claimed to remember the "*carpa*," only to find that what they remembered was a tent in which Mexican films were shown or in which evangelical Protestant missionaries conducted revivals. *Mexicanos*, it appears, readily apply the term "*carpa*" to any performance or entertainment that takes place in a tent.

Kanellos notes a 1927 newspaper article titled "*Las enseñanzas del teatro*" which satirized this attitude at the same time that it criticized the Teatro Zaragoza for being a second-class theater (Kanellos 1990: 78-79). Many of my own consultants who performed in the *carpa* expressed similar sentiments to me with apparent sincerity, even after narrating *sketches* that revolved around sexual and scatological jokes. This suggests to me that *respeto* and morality constituted the language of legitimacy in San Antonio's Mexican-American stage, and that performers were and are compelled to invoke this language even when they did not practice it.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Spanish-language theater in San Antonio articulated only the "*méxico lindo y querido*" ideology of the exiled ricos. Perched in their exclusive opera boxes which "*no los tocaba nadie* ['nobody touched']" (Ybarra-Frausto 1983: 43), the elite shared the *teatros* with the middle and working class *público* in the orchestra pit. The *artistas de teatro* themselves were a diverse group, many of whom were native born and of middle and working class origins. Indeed, one of the greatest comic actresses of Mexican-American stage, Beatriz "La Chata" Noloesca, was a *tejana* from a relatively humble family. Enchanted by the theater from an early age, she started out as an usher in the Teatro Nacional (42). After her marriage to José Areu of the Trio Hermanos Areu, she began to perform herself and develop her trademark *peladita* character, which Ybarra-Frausto describes as "a quick-witted, playfully mischievous scamp," (44). Her comedy drew heavily on the *picardía* of vernacular *Mexicano* humor while remaining within the bounds of decency mandated by the ideology of *respeto* (48). She later formed her own company, presenting *tandas de variedad* which "freely borrowed from Anglo-American burlesque and vaudeville and from the diverse Mexican traditions of the *teatro de género chico*" (Ybarra-Frausto 1984: 55). Thus, the *ricos'* purist esthetic of *mexicanidad* coexisted uneasily on the prewar Spanish-language stage with an emergent, distinctly Mexican-American bilingual and bicultural sensibility. It is reasonable to assume that this new style appealed to the West Side's nascent middle class, whose ideology of a "Mexican self" understood "within the framework of aspiring Americanization" (García 1991: 281) would, with the rise of LULAC, become hegemonic among *mexicanos* in southern Texas after World War II. Thus, *teatro* did not present a unified voice or a consistent picture of Mexican-American identity. Rather, it was a space in which actors and audience members of various generational and class backgrounds symbolically negotiated and contested that identity. While the *ricos'* Mexicanism did not fully control the style and content of the *tandas*, their taste for restraint seems to have remained influential, if not entirely unchallenged, in setting the tone of the spectacle.

4. El lado sol: The Carpa and its audience

Let us now return to the issue of the differentiation between *teatro* and *carpa*, beginning with a *carpero's* view of the difference Astol recounted in the behavior of audiences in the two venues. In the comments transcribed below, Rodolfo García uses the ways in which the *ricos* (whom he calls *los lagartijos*, 'the lizards') and *la plebe* ('the common people') distinguished themselves from one another at a bullfight as an example of the difference between the tastes of the two groups and of the idea of *categoría*, a term which, with a nod to Bourdieu, we might translate as "distinction" (1984).

Aquí venían al teatro muchos actores cómicos de México, y venían unos que no usaban mal vocabulario. Usaban chistes que eran aceptados por el público de aquí, porque habían cómicos de categoría, cómicos que decían chistes . . . menos colorados

Me voy a referir con, por ejemplo, en una corrida de toros. En una corrida de toros, hay diferentes asientos. Allá hay *sombra* allá, ves. Allá es 'onde va la gente de categoría, los que . . . *lagartijos*, les dicen, con corbata y todo éso, catrines. Catrines que van muy arregladitos con corbata, y allí 'stan con mucha categoría y nomás que apla:uden así

[RG aplaude con los puntos de los dedos.]

Y acá en *sol*, acá 'onde 'staba más barata, es 'onde iba yo. A mí nunca me gustaba. Yo tenía dinero pa' ir allá, pero a mí me gustaba ir acá 'onde dicen, "¡É:ese no sirve! ¡Écha ese cabrón pa' fuera!" y quién sabe qué, y luego una vieja se desmallaba, y "¡A:y!" Y 'stá uno viendo, verdad; 'stá uno mirando y diciendo jokes . . . "Échate un trago," y que agarra la botella. Allí no hay escrúpulo de que . . . tú tomas o yo voy a tomar u otro. No, "A:y, echa la botella." ¡Baum! ¡Baum! y es pura tequila pesada, lo más corriente, que estás tomando. Pos . . . prendes una mecha y puede ser explosión allí, pues. Es puro high rolling, (se rie) puro . . . ninety-two octane . . . éste, pura . . . whiskey muy fuerte, muy pesado, o cerveza muy barata.

Y allí puedes gritar, gritarle al torrero, "¡E:se no sirve!" Y allá en *sol* [*sombra*], no. Esa allá son muy . . . categoría allá. Las viejas traen un vasito así, de whiskey o lo que sea. Es lo mismo con el actor cómico. Hay cómicos que vienen y hablan muy bonito y dicen muchos chistes, y hay cómicos muy pesados.

(Here, many comedians from Mexico came to the theater, and some came who didn't use bad vocabulary. They used jokes that were accepted by the public here, because there were comedians of *categoría*, comedians who told . . . less dirty jokes

I'll refer, for example, to a bullfight. In a bullfight, there are different seats. There there's *sombra* ["shade"] over there, you see. That's where the people of *categoría* go, the ones . . . they call *lagartijos*, with ties and all that, dandies. Dandies who go all gussied up with ties, and there they are with lots of *categoría*, and they just applaud like this

[RG claps the tips of his fingers together]

And here in the *sol* ["sun"], where it was cheaper, is where I went. I never liked it. I had money to go over there, but I liked to go here, where they say, "He:y, that guy's no good! Throw the bum out!" and who knows what, and then a broad faints, and "A:y!" And you're seeing, right; you're watching and telling jokes . . . "Have a drink," and you grab the bottle. There, there's no scruples about . . . you drinking or me drinking or somebody else. No, "A:ay, give me the bottle." Boom! Boom! and it's pure hard tequila, the most common, that you're drinking. Well . . . you light a match and there could be an explosion there. It's pure high rolling, [laughs] pure . . . ninety two octane . . . um, pure . . . really strong whiskey, real heavy, or real cheap beer.

And there you can yell, yell to the bullfighter, "He:ey, that guy's no good!" And there in the *sol* [RG probably means to say "*sombra*"], no. Over there, they're . . . *categoría*. The broads have their little glass there, of whiskey or whatever. It's the same with the comedian. There are comedians who come and talk real pretty and tell lots of jokes, and there are real heavy comedians.¹²

In these comments, Mr. García is distinguishing not between the *carpa* and *teatro* per se, but between two types of performers: *Cómicos de categoría* ('high-class comedians') and *cómicos pesados* ('heavy, rough comedians') and the different kinds of audiences that appreciated each type. While the elite and the upwardly mobile middle class affected a dignified, refined manner in the shady, more expensive side of the arena for the bullfight (*sombra*), the working class in the cheaper, unshaded side (*sol*) defined the area relegated to them as a chaotic, ludic space reminiscent of what Bakhtin calls the "carnavalesque crowd." Bakhtin describes such a grouping as "both concrete and sensual." It is "not merely a crowd," but "the people as a whole . . . organized in their own way . . . It is outside of and contrary to all existing forms of coercive socioeconomic and political organization" (1984: 255). The intense heat of the sun and the feel and smell of bodies packed together made it impossible to forget one's surroundings, sit back, and observe the show detachedly. *El lado sol* was an intense space, where people had to become the show, where they played and drank hard. Their heckling was a forum in which all of the pleasures and pains of life found their expression. These people, who enjoyed little dialogue with the dominant Anglo power structure, or even with the dominant sectors of the *mexicana/o* community, used their taunts and outrageous behavior to forcibly convert the bullfight into a dialogue and to make themselves impossible to ignore. The *carpa* was designed for exactly such a dialogue. Heckling and other forms of performer/audience interaction were part of the show, as the following routine, as narrated by Mr. García, illustrates.

Example 3.

Están como ese chiste que decían
"Te voy a decir un chiste, pero está muy
colorado."
"Pues, no. ¡Dílo!"

Y yo respondo,
"No hombre, no, no"
"¡sí, hombre! Dílo!"

Y yo respondo,
"Bueno, lo voy a decir."
No, hombre, pero está muy colorado.
"No le hace,"

yo respondo.
"¡Dílo!"

Y yo respondo ultimadamente. Y luego empieza a decir la gente que lo diga o no lo diga. Sí, como saben la gente qué están haciendo estos programas desde que le dice uno al público que sí, si hacen lo que esta diciendo él.

Bueno, ago así por el estilo, y luego le digo yo,

They're like that joke in which they said,
"I'm going to tell you a joke, but it's very
dirty (lit. "red.").
"Well, no. Tell it."

And I respond,
"No, man. No. No."
"Yes, man, tell it!"

And I respond,
"O.K., I'm going to tell it."
"No, man, but it's really dirty."
"It doesn't matter,"

I respond.
"Tell it!"

And I respond finally, and then the audience starts to say that I should tell it or shouldn't tell it. Yeah, since the people know what those programs are doing once you tell the public, "yes," if they do what he's saying.

O.K., something like that, and then, I tell him,

¹² From tape PH90-1-2:2, on file at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio. I have placed words that appear to me to stand for key 'emic' concepts that inform don Rodolfo's understanding of class.

<p>“Bueno, pues lo voy a decir entonces.” Y luego, dice, “A ver, comiémzale.” Y dice, “Anteanoche pasé por tu casa, y mu fuiste para decirme allí te pican las hormigas.” Y luego me dicen, “¿Qué tiene ése de colorado? ¿Y de picoso? ¿Y de picoso, qué tiene ése de picoso?” “Pues luego las hormigas y la picoteada que me dieron.” (Sandoval 1987: 15)</p>	<p>“O.K., then. I’m going to tell it.” And then he says, “Let’s see, start it.” And he says, “Last night I passed by your house, and you went out to tell me that there the ants bite you.” And then, they ask me, “What’s dirty (lit. “red”) about that? And biting? And biting, what’s biting about that?” “Well then it’s about the ants and the bite that they gave me.”</p>
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The actors' dialogue described here was designed to build up the audience's anticipation for the joke, and the audience, as if on cue, made its own contribution to the success of the joke. In some cases, the interaction between performer and audience was more antagonistic. In a post-interview conversation with me, Mr. García recalled an incident in which, during his routine, a man in the audience continuously interrupted him by shouting, “¡Ora cuñado!” (‘Hey, brother-in-law!’ i.e. ‘I fucked your sister’). Mr. García claims to have dispatched the young man by responding, “Ah pues sí, parece que te reconocía. Tú serás mi entenado. Dile a tu mamá que nos vamos a reunir en el mismo lugar que siempre” (‘Oh yeah, I thought I recognized you. You must be my stepson. Tell your mother we’ll meet in the usual place’).¹³ These examples show how the “*espacio más reducido* (more reduced space)” of the *carpa*, combined with the social facts of shared working class origin and a common struggle for existence, created an intimate, if sometimes conflictive, relationship between performer and audience, similar to that which existed in performances of *conjunto* music (Peña 1985: 151). In a space like the *carpa*, in which working-class people set the tone, the atmosphere was one of irrepressible gaiety, raunchy madcap humor, and carnivalesque degradation and renewal. It seems likely, then, that the *sketches*, jokes and dance routines, many of which were similar to, or even directly borrowed or adapted from those presented in the “legitimate” Spanish-language theater, assumed an entirely different character in the *carpa*.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the ideology of *respeto* disappeared with this change in setting, audience, and tone. My interviews with the Garcías and others suggest that while the atmosphere of the *carpa* may have indeed been more informal and carnivalesque than that of the theaters, performers still had to take care about the use of obscenity. It would also be a mistake to assume, as Don Lalo Astol seemed to in the interview quoted above, that the audiences of the *carpas* shared a uniform love of *groserías* (coarse language) and that performers could simply blurt out such words as “*pendejo*” all of the time and everywhere. There were doubtlessly companies that staged racy, uncensored revues with the *soltura* (‘abandon’) that Astol describes above, but the *artistas* of the Carpa García claim to have taken the idea of *respeto* quite seriously. For not all audiences, and not all sectors of any individual audience were alike. Like the theater with its opera boxes and orchestra pit, the Carpa García had *los reserved seats* (‘reserved seats’) near the ring and *las gradas* (‘bleachers’) further back, differentiated by price. Although the correspondence between class affiliation and choice of seating was undoubtedly less rigid

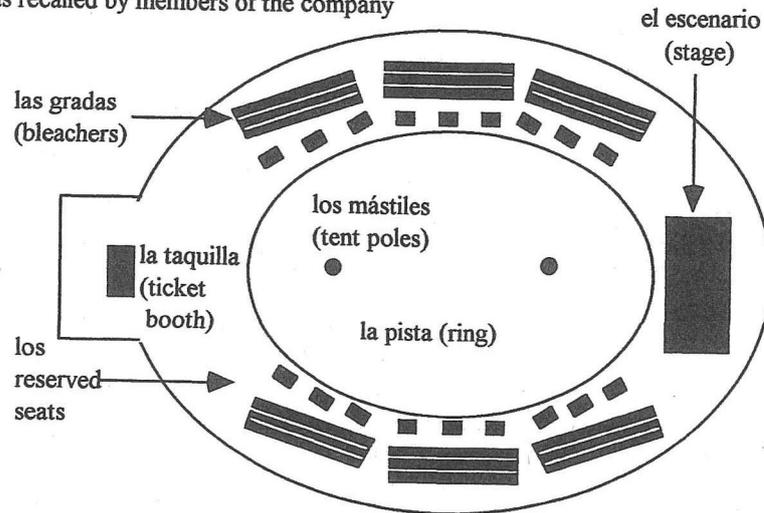
¹³ I reproduce Mr. García’s story from memory, as it was told at a moment after a formal interview when the tape recorder was not running.

in the *carpa* than in the Teatro Nacional, the existence of the difference suggests a heterogeneous audience. In discussing the appropriateness of various jokes and *sketches* for different audiences with me, the Garcías consistently distinguished between the "*la palomilla*," a rough, mostly male audience, and "*familias*," or families with children. The dialogue mentioned above, in which some sectors of the audience shout for the comedian to tell the dirty joke and others shout for him not to, provides an idealized illustration of the attitudes these two sectors held towards erotic humor. Rodolfo García comments on the effect that his audience's divergent tastes had on the choices he made as a performer.

There's different kinds of people in Mexico. There's the high-class people, and there's the middle-class people, and there's the real nasty people. Those are the poor people, *la plebe*, que hablan de pura picardía, puras palabras ofensivas, vulgares (who use lots of rough language, lots of offensive, vulgar words.)

Esos cómicos que venían de México pensaban que viniendo aquí, donde hay Spanish languages, 'onde hay gente mexicana, usaban estas palabras so the people get more kick out of it. (Those comedians who came from Mexico thought that coming here, where there are Spanish languages, where there are Mexcian people, they would use these words so people get more of a kick out of it). So that people like them. And sometimes, people like hear a real nasty jokes, but there's a lot of people, they don't want to hear that, especially if they've got his kids. But I never used that kind of language¹⁴

FLOOR PLAN OF THE CARPA GARCIA
as recalled by members of the company



¹⁴ From tape PH90-5-1:2 on file at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.

Note that in contrast to the previously quoted statement, in which he enthusiastically identifies himself with *la plebe*, Mr. García here tries to distance himself here from that sector of the *plebe* that delighted in vulgarity. Other comments suggest that his use of tabooed vocabulary and subject matter varied with his the tastes of different audiences in different settings, but the distinctions he makes here between the various sectors of the audience and their corresponding tastes remain instructive. In my interviews, he stressed the division between jokes and parodies of popular songs that were acceptable for *familias* in the *carpa* and those that were only appropriate for a nightclub audience consisting primarily of *palomilla*. While the latter sector of the audience appreciated *colorado* humor and required none of the restraint demanded by the ideology of *respeto*, the former tended to be much more easily offended. These differences illustrate Richard García's statement that "the ideal of being *gente decente* permeated the everyday life of the entire community" (1991: 146-47), as well as the danger of assuming the unity of a particular class *a priori* (Hall 1986: 14). While the *palomilla* probably tended to reject bourgeois concepts of decency, *familias* who aspired to work their way up the social ladder demanded that their children be protected from "bad influences."

The fear of "bad influences" caused hostility towards the *carpa* form itself in some of the small towns that the Carpa García visited. To counteract this stigma, which was due both to the *carpa's* association with the working class and to the fact that some tent shows did indeed present raunchy, ribald entertainment that disregarded the norms of *respeto*, the Garcías often performed under the sponsorship of the Catholic Church, donating between ten and twenty percent of their profits to local church activities. Manuel V. García, the show's owner and Mr. García's father, traveled ahead of the company, *agarrando el lugar*: Sizing up the towns and making arrangements with the municipal and ecclesiastical authorities in each place. The presence of church personnel taking tickets at the entrance to the tent allayed the public's fears that the show would be too risqué. Manuel García's daughter Esther, herself an actress, acrobat, and dancer, remembered the measures her father had to take as the show's representative when arranging a performance

The church, they always needed help, and we needed help also, so they were very nice about it. They would let us . . . on one condition. They would say, "We don't want a circus to come in here and they have any of those gamblers or women to go out. They had their own regulations, and my Daddy would say, "No. This is a whole family. They're all married. My sons are all married. My daughters are all married. It's only the family. We promise you that nothing bad will go on."

"Well, we want you to respect the town."¹⁵

"Respecting the town" (*respeto*) involved avoiding public vices in order to preserve the company's reputation for being "a quiet, family show business."¹⁶ In our interview, Mrs. Robinson remembered a negative example.

There were some shows, you know, where the girls used to go into town and make the *cantinas* and all that, other shows, you know. Because in some towns, they locked the girls from one show, and

¹⁵ from tape PH90-3-1:3, on file at the University of Texas Institute of Texan Cultures at San Antonio.

¹⁶ *ibid.*

they burn those towns, and then when a good family goes in there, they wouldn't let you in. That was along the Valley, where these girls from this show went out with some boys from the town, and they lock 'em in. So they didn't want nothing like that. Now, after the show, they would drink in the *carpa* there, They would drink, fight, and then the law would come in to the scene, and that's what they didn't want, a disturbance. So my mother and Daddy never allowed that. If you wanted to drink, you had to do it in your trailer and then go to sleep.¹⁷

Only by working with the church and observing strict behavioral codes could the *Carpa García* overcome the common perception that the *carpas* were bawdy vehicles for vice and corruption.

5. Genre play and identity: Analysis of the parody

Having drawn attention to key aspects of the *carpa* and its historical and social milieu, we may return to the text of "A medias copas" for a more detailed analysis. Like all parodies, "A medias copas" foregrounds the generic conventions and the "social, ideological, and political-economic connections" of the original (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 147), and can therefore be considered 'metacultural.'¹⁸ In Bakhtin's terms, then, the tango is the object of representation, "the hero of the parody" (1981: 51). The tango enjoyed a florescence in Mexico beginning in the 1930s (Sareli 1977: 13), and was probably brought to Texas by commercial recordings and by touring musical and theatrical acts from that country that visited San Antonio and other southwestern cities. Although the *bandoneon*, an accordion-like free-reed instrument, was the centerpiece of most Argentine tango groups, the form was never popular with the accordion-based *conjunto*. All available evidence suggests that to the extent that the tango was performed live in southern Texas, it was performed by the middle-class *orquestas* (large wind ensembles modeled after American jazz bands) and by solo singers. It is partly for this reason that the tango was received in southern Texas as an exotic, cosmopolitan, high-society genre, more a symbol of a generalized, encompassing pan-Latin-American culture than of local tradition

The tango's middle-class association in Texas is the result of its complex transnational history. According to Marta Savigliano, the tango first emerged among marginal Argentines in the late nineteenth century as a scandalous, tense dance "in which a male/female embrace tried to heal the racial and class displacement provoked by urbanization and war" (1995: 30). In the lyrics of these early "ruffianesque" tangos, treacherous, cruel women betray their male romantic partners, often by seeking out men of higher status. In these songs, then, "class issues are interpreted as a sex problem," and "women are accused of lacking class loyalty and are assured a decadent and lonely end" (62). Originally a stigmatized form in Argentina, the tango spread to the theaters and dance

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ An anonymous reviewer objected to my assertion that "all" parodies foreground the social, ideological, and political-economic connections of some original, arguing that some parodies are narrower in focus than the one under consideration and that some are even self-celebratory. I would grant that parodies engage the social and political-economic associations of their originals with varying degrees of denotative explicitness and with different kinds of "spin." However, I find it hard to imagine a parody that did not bring some such aspects of its original to consciousness in some way. For that reason, I choose to retain my original wording at the beginning of his sentence.

halls of Paris and London, driven by a colonialist desire for the exotic. Like the raw materials imported to metropolitan industrial centers and converted into manufactured products to be sold to the dependent south, the tango later returned to its land of origin in a refined form. The romantic tango that arrived in Mexico in the 1930s, then, was the product of this global traffic in emotional capital.

This would be especially true of "*A media luz*," the song that Mr. García chose to parody, which is an intriguing example of the romantic tango discussed earlier. This song immerses the listener in the blissful, decadent opulence of an apartment rented by a presumably wealthy man for a secret amorous liaison, celebrating exactly the sort of situation that the older, working-class tango condemns. It reveals the silent, enclosed space of this apartment to the listener through an enumeration of the luxury commodities that adorn that space. The "interior twilight" (**line 17**) of the apartment forms a darkened reflection - in half-light - of the bourgeois home itself, an intimate space away from the intimate sphere, whose silence keeps secrets and nurtures inconspicuous consumption. Because it is an illicit affair that occurs in the apartment, "*A media luz*" retains a hint of the tango's old transgressive character. But the song's transgression is a thoroughly bourgeoisified one in which the illicit love affair is reduced to one more piece in a collection, an object to be stashed away next to the piano and the cocaine, far from the prying eyes of competitors.

Rodolfo García's parody first engages its original in the way that a retort in a verbal duel engages the utterance that precedes it: By using a minimal economy of formal effort to achieve a maximally semantically powerful reversal (Sherzer 1987: 306, n7). In the first line of the parody, a made-up address located not in any particular street, but merely in the "*coyuya*" (the *barrío*), mimics the Buenos Aires street address that appears in the original. In line 2, the luxury apartment is replaced with a *jacal*, a house of sticks and adobe that in the 1940s had only recently ceased to be common among the rural poor in Mexican American south Texas. The piano, night-stand, victrola and telephone (**lines 6-9**) are replaced with a *petate* (a humble reed-mat) (**line 3**) a crate for a pillow (**line 4**), a broken armchair full of bedbugs (**line 5**), and a dirty slip left behind by the cruel, offstage woman who is the parody's ostensible object (**line 7-9**).¹⁹ Standing metonymically for the lower stratum of the *ingrata's* absent body, this detail carnivalizes and embodies the sentimentality of the original. This tactic continues in the final lines of the first stanza, which juxtaposes the porcelain cat of the original with a living dog whose fleas violate the boundaries of the speaker's body.

The parody reverses the original not only in its treatment of inanimate objects but also in its reified treatment of femininity. Savigliano has noted that women in the tango

... can be either the object of male disputes or the trigger of a man's reflections. In either case, it is hard for a woman to overcome her status as a piece of passional inventory. The difference is that in the first position, the woman is conceived as an inert object of passion, whereas in the second she is a living one. (1995: 48).

Where the original places its female character in the first position, Mr. García's parody

¹⁹ I thank Celso Alvarez-Cáccamo for his helpful and merciful discretion in pointing out a mis-transcription and mis-translation of this line in the version of this paper given at the AAA meetings in December of 1998.

clearly places her in the second. In doing so, it returns the romantic tango to its ruffianesque roots. But the parody's intertextual manipulation does not stop there. The whiny confession of male weakness that characterized the ruffianesque tango, with its construction of a treacherous, cruel, absent woman, closely resembles a similar trope that Mr. García's audience would have associated with the greater Mexican *canción ranchera*. The *mexicano* ideology of *lo ranchero* differs in some ways from the transgressive lumpenproletarian masculinity celebrated in the tango, focusing as it does on ". . . self-sufficiency, candor, simplicity, sincerity, and patriotism . . ." (Peña 1985: 11). Yet the *canción ranchera* often portrays such masculinity through its breach, by showing the *ranchero's* vulnerability to the stratagems of a woman whose character is diametrically opposed to the qualities listed above.

The second stanza of the parody follows the original out of the intimate sphere into the public realm of recreation. But where the original tango describes activities that are rigorously scheduled as the work-week that circumscribes them (lines 20-25), the parody breaks out of the *jacal* into the undisciplined male public sphere of the *cantina*. There, the speaker vents his feelings of impotence, loss, and abandonment in a *parranda* that recognizes neither boundaries nor schedules. But as he licks his wounds in this space of mourning, he is an object of ridicule, for his treacherous ex-lover has made a *güey* (lit. "ox", fig. "impotent fool, cuckold") of him. This trope of the abandoned man driven to drink is also the topic of the chorus, which displays less parallelism with the original than the two other stanzas, and the parody treats this subject with some degree of seriousness. In interviews, Mr. García has argued that this image of betrayed heterosexual love and male humiliation is a universal theme. Indeed, it seems that his own emotional identification with the protagonists of his parodies is behind his statements that his parodies come from "*la realidad—de lo que pasa*" ('reality - from what happens'). What appears as a highly conventionalized plot to the outsider is for him a crystallization of the emotional impact of actual events. Like the popular songs they satirize, his parodies are not introspective, novelistic descriptions of characters, but broadly constructed templates into which the details of personal experience can be written.²⁰

Of course, the *canción ranchera's* stereotype of a treacherous, cruel woman is linked to an ideology of male dominance. In a widely-debated examination of this issue, Peña has characterized this figure as a key symbol of a greater Mexican "folklore of machismo" which symbolically displaces class conflict onto the more readily visible gender conflict (1992: 40). Peña concludes that for *mexicano* workers, this move becomes a principle of illusory compensation, a 'false consciousness' that prevents them from comprehending the true reality of class inequality (41). This analysis is similar to Savigliano's interpretation of the tango cited above and has some explanatory value. Its usefulness is limited, however, by its relegation of gender to the status of a mere mediator of a supposedly more fundamental class conflict. A more complete analysis would acknowledge this stereotype as one of many examples of the complex overdetermined relationship between gendered and class-based discourses of identity. Indeed, this relationship is not limited to greater Mexico or to Latin America, for similar stereotypes have emerged both in Anglo-American country music and in the blues. None of these genres is monolithic, of course, and discourse about treacherous women has always

²⁰ Cf. Haggard 1966 for a lyrical examination of this issue in Anglo-American Country Music.

generated a counter-discourse dealing with the treachery and cruelty of men in heterosexual love.

Indeed, all of these musical styles seem fixated on the frustration of consumer society's promise of happiness through heterosexual intimacy (Buck-Morss 1989: 188). Mr. García's parody highlights this theme by focusing the ruined possessions and carnivalesque, bodily details discussed above. The dirty slip hung from a nail, the vermin which infest the body of the whiny narrator, and the dirtiness attributed to women in general in the song's final misogynistic jab (**lines 37-38**), bring the heart-centered sentiment of the tango and the *ranchera* down to the generating lower stratum of the body. Furthermore, Don Fito's clownlike costume, his exaggerated slapstick movements on stage, and the bawdy *picardía* of his lyrics must have contrasted sharply both with the genteel passion of the romantic tango and the wounded pride of the *ranchera*. The seriousness of the male narrator's self-pity thus became relativized and was placed in "cheerfully irreverent quotation marks" (Bakhtin 1981: 55). But I suspect that this attempt to bring laughter and sorrow together only went so far. Carnavalesque though it may be, the parody ends on a somber note, highlighting "the increasing self-alienation of the person who inventories his[her] past as dead possessions" (Buck-Morss 1989: 189).

6. Conclusion

To understand "A medias copas" and other *carpa* humor, we must keep in mind Limón's caveat that "only by specifying the historical moment and social location of some of the carnivalesque" can we read it as "an expression of class (and race) contestative discourse" (1994: 139). It is to this end that I have tried to situate don Fito's performance within the emergent class order and the politics of aesthetics of which the *carpa* was a part. I have argued that in its original context of performance, Mr. García's parody articulated a distinctly local Mexican American identity which was strongly linked to a sense of working-class masculinity. Indeed, stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity were among the most salient generic features in play in this process. The prevalence of the "Traacherous Woman" stereotype in "A medias copas" and other parodies exposes the weakness of Bakhtin's thesis that the carnivalesque is opposed to all kinds of hierarchy or coercive social organization (1984: 255).

Nevertheless, the parody did take an implicit critical stance towards some aspects of the social formation from which it emerged by effecting a series of symbolic inversions of the original song. These inversions juxtaposed the conventions of the romantic tango with those of the ruffianesque tango and the Mexican *canción ranchera*. By invoking symbols of traditional *mexicano* material culture and rural poverty, as well as the longing masculine subject of the *ranchera*, the parody reversed the original song's bourgeoisified focus on luxury goods and interior space. By inscribing a "low," localized register of language onto the "high," cosmopolitan music of the tango, the parody established a critical relationship to received, class-bound aesthetic standards of evaluation that were prevalent in San Antonio's theatrical public, among both performers and audience-members. This politics of aesthetics was linked to ongoing processes of race and class formation in Mexican American San Antonio. Thus, by mixing genres and invoking grotesque body imagery, *carperos* like don Fito converted the tensions arising from class and ethnic conflict into renewing laughter.

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