

Introduction

In 1901, police in Mexico City raided a raucous party in an upscale neighborhood attended solely by men, about half of whom were dressed as women. Forty-one men were arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to hard labor off the coast of Yucatán. This event and the ensuing social scandal about it, which was well represented in the media of the time, have been identified as the emergence of homosexuality in Mexico (Monsiváis, “Ortodoxia” 199; Irwin, *Mexican* xi–xii).¹ Indeed, the number “41” has been associated since this event with male homosexuality in Mexican popular culture. A veritable explosion of cultural production related to the scandal, including newspaper and tabloid reporting, *corridos* (folk ballads), cartoons by the legendary José Guadalupe Posada, and even a naturalist novel contributed to the establishment of a particular notion of homosexuality in the Mexican imaginary (Irwin, et al.). Especially important was the association of male homosexuality with gender nonconformity, which contributed to the reification of a stereotype of homosexual men as effeminate. This stereotype has influenced views of male homosexuality in Mexico since that time, or as Carlos Monsiváis puts it: “Desde entonces y hasta fechas recientes en la cultura popular el gay es el travesti y sólo hay una especie de homosexual: el afeminado” [“From that moment until recently in popular culture the gay is the *travesti* and there is only one type of homosexual: the effeminate type”] (“Ortodoxia” 199).² Indeed, it is possible to trace the development of this stereotype in Mexican cultural production throughout the 20th and into the 21st centuries, especially in the mass media, where it has been reproduced in its most simplistic forms.³ In the vast majority of these cases, the homosexual characters are comic figures who are the targets of satire and ridicule. In other words, the use of humor to marginalize and stigmatize LGBTQ people has been a part of Mexican popular culture since at least the beginning of the 20th century.

This stereotype highlights the association of male homosexuality with gender nonconformity and is symptomatic of how homophobia in Mexico, as everywhere, is ultimately related to misogyny. As Raewyn Connell concisely puts it: “Patriarchal culture has a simple interpretation of gay men: they lack masculinity” (143). Monsiváis reaches the same conclusion about the Mexican context but emphasizes how lacking masculinity in Mexico is seen to be one’s own fault:

Según los guardianes de la Norma, un homosexual se degrada voluntariamente al asemejarse a las mujeres, y el registro público y privado de tal envilecimiento justifica la condena machista.

[According to the guardians of the Norm, a homosexual degrades himself voluntarily by becoming like a woman, and the public and private register of that debasement justifies macho condemnation.] (73–74)

On the other side of the binary, female gender nonconformity also became a subject of social anxiety before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution. Similar to the construction of the stereotype of the effeminate homosexual man, there is an association of lesbian sexuality with traditionally masculine behaviors that leads to the reification of stereotypes of lesbian women as “*machorras*” [dykes, tomboys]. These stereotypes have had a less storied, though no less oppressive, history in the mass media, especially television (Ruiz-Alfaro; Muñoz Rubio 58–59; Alfarache 132).

In 2006, more than a century after the 41 were shipped off to a penal colony, the government of the Federal District that encompasses Mexico City passed a law establishing civil unions for same-sex couples. This was followed in 2009 by full equality for same-sex marriages. These events were paralleled by a series of similar laws passed in several Mexican states and a 2015 Supreme Court ruling that mandated the uniform recognition in Mexico of all marriages performed anywhere in the country. Though not without its controversies, marriage equality can generally be considered a sort of barometer of the social acceptance of homosexuality, and in the years mentioned above, Mexico joined other Latin American nations, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Uruguay, that were moving towards legal recognition of same-sex unions.⁴ Around this same time, there was also a greater visibility of queer and homosexual themes and people in the mass media, in popular films like Serio Tovar’s *Cuatro*

lunas [*Four Moons*] (2014) and Nicolás López's *Hazlo como hombre* [*Do It Like an Hombre*] (2017), *telenovelas* like *La vida en el espejo* ["Life in the Mirror"] (1999), and *El sexo débil* ["The Weaker Sex"] (2011), broadcast on TV Azteca and Canal 3, respectively, and the LGBT-themed sketch comedy show *Desde Gayola* (2002–2013), ["From the Critics' Gallery"] and talk show *Guau* (2000–2015) ["Wow"], which ran on the cable music channel Telehit.⁵ Mexican film could also boast the internationally feted art-house work of openly gay directors and producers like Julián Hernández and Roberto Fiesco. In late 2020, the case of the 41 itself made it to the big screen in *El baile de los 41* [*The Dance of the 41*], a dramatic film with high production values directed by the critically acclaimed auteur David Pablos. Literature, on the other hand, now had a tradition of texts portraying queerness dating back to at least the 1930s, as well as a decades-old critical tradition focusing on queer themes and a lively independent and electronic publishing scene.⁶

Many things had obviously changed in Mexican society in the time that elapsed between the 41 and the beginning of the third millennium that contributed to this shift: changes in sexual mores and gender norms during and after the Revolution; the presence of major queer figures like the writers Salvador Novo and Carlos Monsiváis and the singers Chavela Vargas and Juan Gabriel; the "sexual revolution" in the 1960s and 70s that intersected with the rise of feminist and homosexual political movements; the AIDS crisis and subsequent political responses to it; the tendency in recent Mexican politics for broad social movements to give way to coalitions of smaller collectives based on subjective identity (Monsiváis, "Introduction"; Carrillo, "How"; Figari; Fiol-Matta).⁷ However, these changes do not imply a limitless march towards freedom and equality. For example, in 2016, then-president Enrique Peña Nieto's pinkwashing proposal to obligate every state in the republic to offer same-sex marriage was met by massive protest marches organized by conservative groups, including the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. Recent polls have suggested that a large portion of the Mexican population believes that public displays of homosexuality should be repressed or even punished, and there continue to be relatively high levels of hate crimes based on homophobia perpetrated in the country (Barreda 230–31; "Informe Crímenes de Odio por Homofobia"). Not surprisingly, this takes place in a context in which there is a high level of violence against women.⁸ While there are many and complex causes for these social problems, the transmission and reinforcement of heteronormativity through humor in Mexican culture has

doubtlessly contributed to the persistence of machismo and homophobia in Mexico. In the interest of challenging these uses of humor that uphold the dominant social structure, the goal of this book is to interrogate how literature uses humor as a queer, decolonizing practice.

The title of this book is *Between Camp and Cursi*, and in it I will be examining the intersection of these two humorous discursive modes (camp and *cursilería*) in Mexican literature. My analysis draws on perspectives from both the United States and Latin America. From the US side, I follow José Esteban Muñoz's reading of camp performance as a strategy of disidentification for queers of color in the United States and Eve Sedgwick's call to read camp texts and practices in a way that balances "paranoid" and "reparative" approaches. From the Latin American side, I draw on Lidia Santos and Carlos Monsiváis's theorizing of *cursilería* in Latin America, which also balances paranoid social critique with a reparative emphasis on the creative, decolonizing possibilities of *lo cursi* as an aesthetic strategy. When combined with theories that explain humor as the portrayal of social contradictions, these perspectives allow me to productively read the intersection of camp and *cursi* humor in the texts below as expressions of queerness that have important implications for questioning the dominant social structure in Mexico and in the wider global context. While humor has long been central to the maintenance of heteronormativity in Mexico, its inherent ambiguity makes it possible to read in ways that question the dominant social structure (Mulkey).

I focus on literature in this study because, as Vinodh Venkatesh argues, Latin American literature is a historical artifact that has played a central role in "shaping national and individual identity from the colonial period to the present" that also facilitates the analysis of gender construction in its intertextual referents, including popular culture (*The Body* 9). Furthermore, literature has long served as one of the most open venues for the expression of sexual dissidence and gender nonconformity in Latin America (Sifuentes-Jáuregui, *Avowal* 239–40n2). Compared with popular culture, I find that Latin American literature generally provides more challenging and profound explorations of queer themes, an observation that seems to be borne out by the number of recent studies examining these themes in literature.⁹ My own study owes a particular debt to those critics who have worked towards queering allegorical portrayals of national and regional identities, thus demonstrating how the rejection of the feminine and the queer has been central to the construction of Latin American identities.

For example, in *Modernity and the Nation*, Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba shows how masculinities in Mexican cultural production are shot through with paradoxes resulting from colonial and postcolonial processes that sensualize the masculine body (and the nation it represents) at the same time that they disempower it (3). In *Mexican Masculinities*, Robert Irwin repurposes Doris Sommer's reading of heterosexual romances in 19th-century Latin American novels as nation-building allegories, focusing instead on how male homosocial relations have represented the nation in Mexican literature. Emilio Bejel effects a similar reading in *Gay Cuban Nation*, where he argues that discourses of Cuban national identity are themselves constituted through a rejection of homosexuality, which always threatens to destabilize those national romances described by Sommer (xvi). Moving from a national to a broader hemispheric perspective, Ben. Sifuentes-Jáuregui argues that the construction of dissident identities based on gender nonconformity in Latin America is analogous to the way that national identities in the region (typically allegorized as heterosexual, masculine figures) are constructed through a parodic imitation of constructs from metropolitan areas. When read through a queer lens, these portrayals can undermine the supposed naturalness of both first world constructs and hegemonic masculinities (*Transvestism* 10). More recently, Venkatesh, starting from Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinities, has interrogated how the portrayal of both hegemonic and nonhegemonic masculinities in contemporary Latin American fiction allegorizes the economic and social processes of neoliberalism (*The Body* 3–4).

All of these scholars undertake what Domínguez-Ruvalcaba refers to as the translation of queer reading practices and northern theoretical paradigms, a decolonial project that “by deconstructing the gender system questions the foundations of the nation and the state,” but that also aims to disrupt the hegemonic flow of theory from North to South (*Translating* 12–13). Their perspectives emphasize the centrality of the experience of colonialism to Latin American subject formation, which is a starting point for many cultural differences with the Global North as well as shared experiences with people of color throughout the world. In this view, heteronormativity is an aspect of colonialism and has profound effects on how genders and sexualities are constructed in Latin America (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, *Translating* 21, 42, 46; Sifuentes-Jáuregui, *Avowal* 240n4). For Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, queerness emerged in Latin America when European discourse began to translate Indigenous sexual practices

into the language of sin, proscribing them with consequences that continue to this day in the form of machismo and homophobia, but also establishing the possibility of queer dissidence in the rejection of such rules (19). Similarly, Sifuentes-Jáuregui defines queerness as “the circuits of desire that disobey any imposed heteronormativity or even homonormativity” (5), and he highlights differences between expressions of sexual dissidence in the Global North and Latin America. For example, rather than the trope of coming out of the closet, in Latin America, “silences and disavowal emerge as central strategies of subject formation of queer Latino America” (16). This is a result, in part, of the centrality of the body in Latin American subject formation, which is another legacy of colonialism, specifically of the way that the domination of racialized bodies was central to the social order established in the colonial period (17).

Another result of this centrality of the body is the primacy of gender crossing as form of identification in Latin American sexualities, an obvious example of which is the figure of the *loca*, or effeminate homosexual man (72–73, 185). This figure, as I noted above, is central to the humorous portrayal of male homosexuality in Mexico, both as a target of ridicule as well as a repurposed figure of resistance. While somewhat similar to effeminate homosexualities from the Anglo-American context, *loca* identities are not exactly the same: “*loca* cannot be translated as gay, or even as queer [. . .]—one cannot translate *locura*, rather one locates queerness, meaning that when we speak across cultures about sexual identifications, we can only approximate those identifications and understand that what we have come across is an ideological template that resonates as something similar, but never the same” (201). Venkatesh expresses a similar view in *New Maricón Cinema* when he rejects the use of the term “queer” as an umbrella term for all LGBT+ identities and instead proposes the notion of “queerying,” which entails “the severing of a strictly Anglophone gaze, the acknowledgment or adoption of the local, and the axiomatic addition of the ‘Q’ to LGBT, and not strictly as an undifferentiated synonym” (214n1).¹⁰ Following these scholars, my goal is to locate queerness, understood broadly as resistance to the norms of gender and sexuality that persist in Latin American societies, in the texts that I analyze below, and to likewise effect a translation of certain theoretical constructs from the Global North to the Latin American context in order to engage in a “queerying” of humorous portrayals of homosexuality. This will allow me to better understand how queerness emerges in the texts in question and how it may be read in a productive, decolonizing manner.

To this end, I argue for the translation of the Anglo-American concept of camp to the Mexican context in order to usefully analyze humorous portrayals of queerness. Like Jonathan Dollimore, I am interested in “that mode of camp which undermines the categories which exclude it, and does so through parody and mimicry” (224). That is, I am interested in a type of camp that is not just a postmodern gay sensibility, but one that is “an invasion and subversion of other sensibilities [that] works via parody, pastiche, and exaggeration” (224–25). Whether this notion can be productively translated to Latin America or not is a subject of debate. For example, Sifuentes-Jáuregui sees camp as a conservative, apolitical sensibility based on consumption and the definition of privilege. He contrasts this with “transvestism,” a series of practices based on gender nonconformity from the Latin American context that he sees as much more radical and potentially subversive: “Camp is about placing ‘quotation marks’ around certain words in order to ironize them; that is, Camp is about defining privilege. Transvestism is about showing that those quotation marks were placed there in the first place by the other and that transvestism works to remove them; transvestism is about exchanging privilege [. . .] Camp is about ‘having.’ Transvestism is about ‘wanting’” (*Transvestism* 63). He has similarly argued that in contrast to the more performative nature of Anglo-American sexualities, Latin American sexualities tend to be more centered on bodily experience as lived through the historical imprint of colonialism (*Avowal* 11). I certainly recognize that camp, as an Anglo-American discourse, cannot simply be transplanted as a concept into Latin America without addressing these problems. I also agree with Sifuentes-Jáuregui’s interpretation of Latin American sexualities as less focused on performative aspects of identity such as “coming out.” However, I do not believe that camp needs to be eliminated from discussions of Latin American culture.

An alternative approach to translating camp for Latin America is provided by Lidia Santos in her analysis of the novels of Severo Sarduy. In *Tropical Kitsch*, she argues that camp, kitsch, and *cursilería* appear frequently in contemporary Latin American cultural production as part of a rhetoric that allegorizes social conflicts in the region. Her reading of camp, like Sifuentes-Jáuregui’s, is informed mainly by Susan Sontag’s seminal 1964 essay on the subject. For Santos, however, the use of camp by subjects who attempt to establish a level of privilege as arbiters of taste can itself be subversive with regards to the dominant social structure, especially when the taste in question is ironically posited as an expression

of sexual dissidence and postcolonial positionality (95). Sarduy's postneobaroque aesthetic, for example, employs a humor based on transvestic gender parody and the intentional "bad taste" of *cursilería* in order to allegorize the contradictions and conflicts of Cuban history (138–42). His camp, in other words, is *cursi*, and it is that *cursilería*, understood as an allegorical expression of marginality from modernity, that marks his camp as Latin American.

José Esteban Muñoz sees a similar use of camp in the comic theatrical performances of the Cuban American performer Carmelita Tropicana. Muñoz reads her use of camp as a form of disidentification—the appropriation of stereotypes in order to affirm a dissident identity—and locates the particularly Latina difference of her camp in the Cuban practice of *choteo* (popular, humorous insulting discourse): "Her *choteo* style is campy and *choteo* is inflected in her campiness" (138). Although Muñoz is referring to a US Latina subject performing in an English-speaking context in which camp is more of a native concept, so to speak, the notion of camp as a humorous expression of queerness inflected by the low-class "bad taste" of Latin American popular culture is clearly very close to Santos's reading of Sarduy. Additionally, his emphasis on the appropriation and repurposing of negative stereotypes by socially marginal groups makes his reading of camp as disidentification very useful for understanding how humor about homosexuality can function in a subversive manner.

In the texts that I read below, I find that the humor used to signal and talk about queerness includes camp (gender-based humor expressing queerness) that is also always *cursi* (expressing a postcolonial marginality from discourses of modernity). The dialectic of oppression and resistance inherent in these expressions means that they should be read, as Sedgwick suggests for camp in the Anglo-American context, in a way that looks to balance paranoid (critical) and reparative (celebratory) approaches. My goal here is to make this intersection of camp and *cursi* humor the center of an inquiry into how literature has challenged heteronormativity in Mexico, with a particular emphasis on how humor portrays social conflicts related to sexuality, gender, race, class, and modernity in a subversive manner.

In this sense, my study seeks to contribute not only to the work of the scholars cited above but also to the corpus of more specifically Mexicanist literary and cultural studies focusing on homosexualities and/or queerness, such as the work of Luis Mario Schneider, Carlos Monsiváis, Antonio Marquet, David William Foster, Claudia Schaefer, Robert Irwin, María Elena Olivera, and Elena Madrigal, among others. This study aims

to highlight, in particular, the relevance of humor to Mexicanist and Latin Americanist literary criticism.

Another goal of this study is to bring attention to many texts that have received scant critical attention. The texts that make up my corpus, all originally published in Mexico, range from canonical works like Luis Zapata's *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* [Adonis García: *A Picaresque Novel*] to "minor" works by major authors like Enrique Serna, out-of-print texts like Calva's *Utopía gay* ["Gay Utopia"], and little-known works by contemporary lesbian writers like Gilda Salinas. All of these texts contain portrayals of gender nonconformity and sexual dissidence with high frequencies of humor that include both the camp and *cursi* discursive modes. They address a range of topics such as sex work, transvestism, bisexuality, same-sex marriage, racism, classism, and homo- and transphobic violence, that are relevant to contemporary discussions of sexuality, gender, race, and human rights Mexico. Rather than a strictly chronological presentation, I have opted for a more thematic organization suggested by the texts themselves. The first two chapters contain what might be called the "foundational" texts of the corpus, in which the use of camp and *cursi* humor is pioneered by authors who portray queerness in ways that challenge hetero- and homonormativity in Mexican society. The following three chapters focus on how later humorous portrayals of queerness through camp and *cursilería* have engaged with particular identities and/or practices, including transvestism, male and female bisexuality, and lesbian sexuality and culture.

Chapter 1 outlines my theoretical approach to camp and *cursilería*, explains how I read these discursive modes as types of humor, and illustrates how they can be combined in the reading of portrayals of queerness that allegorize social conflicts surrounding gender, sexuality, race, class, and modernity. Beginning with a general definition of camp as an expression of queerness, especially through gender parody, I engage with José Esteban Muñoz's reading of camp as disidentification and Eve Sedgwick's call to approach camp in a way that balances paranoid and reparative reading practices. Similarly, I consider Lidia Santos's and Carlos Monsiváis's theorizations of *lo cursi* as a discourse that can creatively express Latin America's postcolonial global position through a parodic recycling of mass culture. In the texts I consider, both camp and *cursilería* tend to appear as humor, that is, a type of discursive mode that expresses social conflict through comic incongruities. Salvador Novo's autobiography *La estatua de sal* [*The Pillar of Salt*] serves as an example of how camp and

cursi humor combine in the portrayal of a queer subjectivity in modern Mexico, while Monsiváis's reading of this work provides an example of how paranoid and reparative reading practices may be combined in the approach to such texts.

Chapter 2 examines two novels published in the late 1970s and early 1980s that mark a shift in Mexican narrative towards both a more frequent and a more humorous portrayal of queerness. *El vampiro de la colonia Roma* [Adonis García: *A Picaresque Novel*] by Luis Zapata and *Utopía gay* ["Gay Utopia"] by José Rafael Calva both employ camp and *cursi* humor in the portrayal of male protagonists who struggle to reconcile their desire to participate in hegemonic masculinity and northern discourses of modernity with their identities as homosexual men in Mexico. Their anxieties regarding gender and modernity reflect social conflicts in an era of rising movements of sexual dissidence and a growing consumer culture, while their behaviors model reparative uses of camp and *cursi* humor, such as the transcendence of negative affect and the constitution of collectives, that also appear in later texts on the same theme. Both works critically engage the Mexican and Western literary traditions through their parody of key genres and their portrayal of queer subjectivities, as do many of the later texts examined below.

Chapter 3 looks at four texts whose protagonists are *travestis*, *vestidas* or *jotas*, that is, queer subjects who are biologically male but who construct female identities through gender parody, and in particular through the recycling of mass-media tropes of *cursi* femininity. Such individuals tend to face a great deal of oppression in Mexican society, which makes the politics surrounding their representation critical. Engaging with Vek Lewis's critique of the figurative portrayal of cross-dressing subjects in Latin America, I examine how the texts float between more realistic portrayals of subjectivities and engagement with the allegorical tradition. *Brenda Berenice o el diario de una loca* ["Brenda Berenice or the Diary of a Queen"] by Luis Montaña is a little-known text that employs a great deal of camp and *cursi* humor in the portrayal of a *jota* subjectivity that is bent on queering the Mexican literary tradition. *La hermana secreta de Angélica María* ["The Secret Sister of Angélica María"] by Luis Zapata, on the other hand, features an intersex protagonist who functions essentially as a metaphor for gender nonconformity and as a critique of the construction of identities through mass media portrayals of femininity. A similar view is trained on the traditions of Mexican cinematic melodrama in Carlos Velázquez's short story "La jota de Bergerac," while his story

“La marrana negra de la literatura rosa” [“The Black Sow of Romance Literature”] exemplifies how a comic engagement with the conventions of marriage as allegory can provide opportunities for paranoid and reparative readings of portrayals of *jota* identities.

Chapter 4 focuses on three novels whose male protagonists could be described as bisexual. Returning to Octavio Paz’s centering of the “penetration paradigm” in *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, I argue that the contradictions inherent in this definition of masculinity can be productively explained with the notion of bisexuality, which appears in these texts as an expression of unresolved social conflicts regarding gender, sexuality, and modernity. In all of these cases, the portrayal of sexuality intersects with a satirical critique of race and class prejudice in Mexico, and in particular with the anxiety surrounding *naquez*, a postcolonial positionality inflected by racism. These novels express such conflicts through their use of camp and *cursi* humor in postmodern parodies of the classic European *Bildungsroman* genre. In *Mátame y verás* [“Kill Me and You’ll See”] by José Joaquín Blanco, the situational bisexuality and humble origins of the protagonist haunt him, imperiling a masculinity he has trouble reconciling with modernity in this allegory of neoliberal Mexico. In *Púrpura* [“Purple”] by Ana García Bergua, the protagonist’s undefined sexual orientation and *cursilería* function as part of a larger portrayal of 20th-century Mexican culture as defined by an ambivalent desire for an unreachable modernity. Finally, the semi-autobiographical *Fruta verde* [“Green Fruit”] by Enrique Serna explores the reparative possibilities of camp and *cursi* humor in the processing of unresolved social conflicts while it also offers an incisive critique of racism, classism, and sex and gender norms in contemporary Mexico.

Chapter 5 focuses on several texts that portray women characters who engage in camp gender parody that relates to lesbian identities in Mexico. Camp humor in which women perform (often exaggerated) female masculinities intersects *cursilería* that functions as an indicator of an often-racialized Latin American positionality intersected by sexual dissidence and gender. José Dimayuga’s novel *¿Y qué fue de Bonita Malacón?* [“Whatever Happened to Bonita Malacón?”] includes queer female characters as part of a provincial cast whose *cursilería* represents the complex relationship of Mexico to global capitalism. Gilda Salinas’s book *Del destete al desempañe: Cuentoslésbicos y un colado* [“From Weaning to the Digestif: Lesbian Stories and a Stowaway”] narrates the construction of lesbian subjectivity through reparative uses of humor based on *cursilería* and gender nonconformity,

while some of the stories from Elena Madrigal's collection *Contarte en lésbico* ["Tell You in Lesbian"] similarly portray an ironic side of lesbian subjectivity through camp and *cursi* humor. While some of these portrayals have been read as lesbophobic, I propose an alternative reading that recognizes their ambiguous relationship to stereotypes but that ultimately emphasizes their deconstructive and decolonial possibilities.

All of the texts mentioned above invoke camp and *cursilería* in the portrayal of sexual dissidence and gender nonconformity undertaken in a Latin American context informed by the continuing effects of coloniality. That is, they portray the irruption of queerness with specific forms of humor that lay bare the contradictions of (dis)modernity in contemporary Mexico and the struggles of people to live and express their desires and identities there. This book is meant to highlight the ways that they do this and to offer reading strategies that can contribute to the growing current of queer, decolonial approaches to Mexican and Latin American culture.