

**Pita Amor, Sabina Berman, and Antonio Serrano:
Camp in DF**

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Camp in Mexico does not necessarily represent a nationalist aesthetic, even though it often finds inspiration in Mexican celebrities. Mexican female impersonators favor stars like María Félix and Irma Serrano, while the more intellectual camp performers Astrid Hadad and Jesusa Rodríguez often satirize Mexican politics. These Mexican themes became camp by way of internationally familiar approaches. Possibly, what varies among western nations has less to do with methods of camp than the campgrounds themselves. The following analysis takes up, if not the issue of Mexican camp, then that of camp set in Mexico City in three works: Guadalupe Amor's novel *Yo soy mi casa* (I Am My Home), Sabina Berman's play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (Between Villa and a Naked Woman), and Antonio Serrano's film *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* (Sex, Shame and Tears). Berman locates her characters in the trendily "alternative" Colonia Condesa, Serrano elects the exclusive Colonia Polanco for his photogenic cast, and Amor's novel takes place in the centric Colonia Juárez, though her diva performance also occurs in the Zona Rosa. These neighborhoods in Mexico City become highly stylized in the aforementioned works, and a fantasy of Mexico City emerges in them as a place where tragedy is impossible. The world weighs less heavily on the glamorous inhabitants of Camp D.F.

Most studies of camp acknowledge the antecedent work titled "On Camp" (1964) by Susan Sontag, as does Mark Booth in the context of the following definition: "To camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits" (69). Booth's definition hints at the incompatibility of the aesthetic with academic study. Academics usually prefer to argue the value of the marginal and thus end up nudging it toward the center. Camp, on the other hand, seems less overtly concerned with bringing the marginal to the mainstream, even though it often discovers the marginal there. Mexicans concerned with camp are no exception to Sontag's influence. As Linda Egan notes, Carlos

Monsiváis echoes Sontag when in *Días de guardar* (1970) he defines the camp aesthetic as a sensibility that values the theatrical, the artificial, the exaggerated, and that which is so bad it becomes good (Egan 47). On the other hand, for Monsiváis, kitsch, or to use the Mexican term, the *cursi* (cheesy), seems less self-conscious of its artificiality than camp. According to the chronicler of Mexican commonplaces, the national taste for the *cursi* sponsors monuments to the Revolution, beauty contests, and quinceañera parties, which in turn leads Egan to paraphrase Monsiváis's belief that the *cursi* "serves as a source of cultural identity for Mexico's masses, not least because it stimulates emotions" (Egan 47). A country replete with kitsch probably plays host to a lively camp scene, and observers of Mexican popular culture suffer no shortage of material for analysis. Although camp and kitsch in Mexico prove highly legible under international readings, the self-awareness of academic writing may ultimately better decipher the irony of camp rather than the emotion of kitsch.

Nevertheless, the superficiality of the camp aesthetic challenges standard approaches in literary criticism. Rather than explore texts for profound, hidden meanings in the manner of much academic work, camp operates according to easily apprehended superficial analysis. For those who know its codes, camp relies on the obvious elements of a work. Precisely this superficiality troubles some feminists in search of that which lies beyond appearances. In spite of the controversy over practices like stereotyped cross-dressing, feminist cultural critics such as Pamela Robertson have helped to shift the study of camp to include female artists. More specifically, Robertson discerns feminist practice in Mae West's and Madonna's deliberate adoption of aspects of male gay culture. I am not convinced that the Mexican works that concern me here support an unequivocal feminist analysis. As I will demonstrate, Guadalupe Amor's highly theatrical performance of femininity coincides with Judith Butler's theory regarding the performative nature of gender, and yet Amor does not follow a coherent form of feminism. Neither does Berman or Serrano. The three writers' experiments with and against gender stereotype seem more inconsistent and stylized than doctrinal. Such ideological quirkiness permits a more expansive exploration of liberty, and characters may act as stupidly and selfishly as they please. This frivolous superficiality supports the aesthetic's accessibility to insiders and supplies camp its power.

One critical approach to the superficial play of camp is to evaluate the shifts in a text along a horizontal plane rather than attempting a vertically-oriented exploration of profound symbolic meanings. The possibility of such a horizontal analysis comes to me by way of Kristin Pessola's study of the early twentieth-century actor and writer, Antonieta Rivas Mercado. To analyze Rivas Mercado's melodramatic techniques, Pessola employs Peggy Phelan's observations on metonymy as relating to the body.¹ The passage in Phelan's chapter on performance distinguishes corporal metonymy from

language-based metaphor and has proven so useful that I repeat the section here: “Metaphor works to secure a vertical hierarchy of value and is reproductive; it works by erasing dissimilarity and negating difference; it turns two into one. Metonymy is additive and associative; it works to secure a horizontal axis of contiguity and displacement” (150). Each of the three Mexican writers’ works becomes legible through this horizontal reading, which takes into account the horizontal structure of the city, and the physical presence of characters, or the “grammar of the body,” to which Phelan ascribes the realm of metonymy, rather than the “grammar of words” found in the realm of metaphor that would plumb the depths of complex mental states or vertically-layered symbolism. The following pages identify the campgrounds and metonymical moves in Amor’s, Berman’s, and Serrano’s texts.

Zona Rosa, Colonia Juárez, and *Yo soy mi casa*

Pita Amor’s trajectory in D.F. traces a circle, from the family home in the Colonia Juárez, which borders the Centro Histórico and falls within the *primer cuadro* of Mexico City, to a later nomadic life that includes a period of residence in hotels in the Zona Rosa, a neighborhood now largely out of style that still connotes a permissive space held over from its fashionable nightlife in the mid-twentieth century up until the early 1990s. In 1991, a septuagenarian Amor returned to the Colonia Juárez, this time to a building on Bucarelli street, a few blocks away from her childhood home on Abraham González. Because the bulk of my analysis concerns Amor’s literary work with the Colonia Juárez, I will first review her poet-diva performance in the Zona Rosa. In *Letanías* (1983), Amor writes with less poetic art than force of personality: “Yo voy por la Zona Rosa/ y entro yo a una joyería [. . .] //Luego me siento en un bar. / No me permiten pagar.// En la casa de papeles / me regalan los pinceles. // Y los mimos de la tarde / me aplauden con gran alarde” (n. p.)² (I walk around the Zona Rosa / and I enter a jewelry store [. . .] // Then I sit down in a bar. / They will not allow me to pay. // In the stationary store / I get the quills as a give away. // And the afternoon mimes /applaud me with great display). Clearly, the poet treasures her iconic status in the neighborhood, though this fame is not necessarily applauded in the way that the poem implies. Elena Poniatowska, Amor’s niece, comments that in the 1960s, Amor was unofficially named the “reina honoraria de la Zona Rosa” (15) (honorary queen of the Zona Rosa). Given the ever more permissive sexual commerce of the neighborhood, this insult perhaps marks a doubly impressive achievement on Amor’s part as far as unsubtle makeup and exaggerated wardrobe go.

Sketches from the satirical Mexican cable television show *Desde Gayola* (2001–2006), available on the Internet site You Tube, show female impersonator Miguel Romero satirizing Pita Amor and dropping the occasional reference to Zona Rosa. The sketch that pits María Félix against Amor allows the film star to insult the poet with the zinger: “[Usted es] [I]a que orinó todas las banquetas de la Zona Rosa con su parte indecorosa” (“Pita Amor”) ([It’s you] who urinated all the sidewalks of the Zona Rosa with her indecorous part). Indeed, contemporary gossip has it that during her struggle with elderly indigence, Amor was known to relieve her bladder on the neighborhood sidewalks; however, no mention of this habit appears in the published literature. Further documentation of Amor’s status as urban legend appears in the prologue to *Las amargas lágrimas de Beatriz Sheridan* (The Bitter Tears of Beatriz Sheridan), where Alberto Dallal comments on Amor’s familiar presence in the Zona Rosa.³ There, Dallal discusses the poet as more than a scandalous body and lauds her body of work: “Pita, a pesar de todo, de todos, de ella misma, es *sus* libros” (10) (Pita, in spite of everything, of everyone, of herself, is *her* books). By identifying Amor as her literary work, Dallal makes my point: the poet-diva is a deliberate self-invention, and her life beyond the page deciphers and even heightens the significance of the page-bound texts.

Regarding her final years in the Colonia Juárez, Amor seems to have transferred her iconic status from Zona Rosa to her original neighborhood. Poniatowska revisits the material published in her prologue to Michael Schuessler’s quirkily, evenly campily designed academic scrapbook on Amor in an essay collected in *Las siete cabritas* (The Seven Little Goats; 2000). There, she remembers that in the Colonia Juárez regular onlookers named the poet “la abuelita de Batman” (Batman’s Grandmother), an unmistakable sign of royal camp performance (32). The elderly Amor’s refusal to admit her physical decline makes this performance, for better or worse, an intentional one. In fact, a clip of an aging, oddly accessorized Amor, insisting with throaty yet incongruous grandeur that the only thing that matters in life is sex, appears in Ximena Cuevas’s video poem *Medias mentiras* (Half Lies; 1996). As the material collected by Schuessler, Poniatowska, and Cuevas demonstrates, Amor displays eternal attentiveness to consumer culture with her outlandish dress and declamatory style, and yet she never seems to consume herself and burn out. She seems out to sell herself without giving much away. Amor refuses to appear as anything but what she thinks she is, which from her perspective makes impossible any uncontrolled discovery or devaluation in market value. In other words, the poet’s methods indicate the paradoxical argument that if all lies on the self-designed surface, then dignity and even youth are forever preserved. The salient contradiction between physical reality and Amor’s interpretation of it allows me to propose that in more or less literal fashion, the poet seems to have camped in her body. The makeup, hair accessories, and jewelry evident

in Cuevas's video, plus Schuessler's description of an elderly Amor's ability to layer an astonishing number of necklaces, rings, and bracelets on her elderly body points to this camp aesthetic.

From the title of Amor's only novel, *Yo soy mi casa* (1957), she turns her (protagonist's) body into a home. The over-the-top novelistic style fictionalizes Pita Román's beginnings in the Colonia Juárez, which include all the expected narrative elements except plot. Instead, the innovative, meandering structure of the novel generally follows the rooms of the protagonist's childhood home in an oddly arbitrary and even horizontally-inclined arrangement. The text privileges artificiality over naturalness, style over substance, and outrageous exaggeration over modest presentation. The trope of home-as-body naturally calls for emphasis on the protagonist's body. Accordingly, near the beginning of *Yo soy mi casa*, the narrator measures the exceptional (child's) body against the cosmos: "Mis enormes ojos abiertos abarcan toda la negrura de la alcoba, de la noche, del universo" (11) (My enormous open eyes encompass all the blackness of the bedroom, of the night, of the universe). The hyperbole regarding these universe-sized eyes continues when Amor writes a page and a half of sentences that begin "Mis ojos . . ." (My eyes) for a total of twenty-two sentences in a row. Sentence number twenty-three exclaims, "¡Siempre mis ojos!" (Always my eyes!), and the following sentence delivers the final line that begins "Mis ojos . . ." (103). The passage defies the academic critic; those who will not celebrate "bad" form or who will not share the fetish for Pita's body, are not invited to enjoy the narrative. Furthermore, with the possible exception of the novel's conclusion, the child's eyes best suit a horizontal consumption of taking in everything contiguous to them rather than accomplishing changes in perception that register ever-greater depth. Thus, *Yo soy mi casa* defies expectations for a Bildungsroman as the protagonist appears from the start as a histrionic anticipation of the older narrative voice. The text does not progress linearly as much as it extends itself over an increasing number of pages in order to drive home the protagonist's forever-diva nature.

The process of self-creation and residence on the façade of oneself turns out to be less efficaciously self-sufficient than the title would have it, in part because Amor borrows the novel's title from her first volume of poetry, *Yo soy mi casa* (1946). By rewriting *Yo soy mi casa*, Amor hints that the first text has not established her definitive house/identity after all and that she is not so much at home with herself as the titles might announce. The poetry and novel bleed into one another, making the protagonist into an extension of Amor's poetic persona, and converting the poetry into the cosmos of the novel. The diva-ego that uses her own poetry from *Yo soy mi casa* for the epigraph and epilogue of the eponymous novel creates an entirely self-referential world. Moreover, the epigraph taken from poem VI of *Yo soy mi casa*: "Casa redonda tenía / de redonda soledad; / el aire que la invadía / era redonda armonía / de irrispirable ansiedad" (I had a round house / of round

solitude; / the air that invaded it / was a round harmony / of asphyxiating anxiety) uses the strong sense of design to contain an anxious (“irrespirable ansiedad”) yet harmonious (“redonda armonía”) cycle of suffering. In this way, Amor emphasizes the deliciousness of style, rather than any truly sordid suffering.

The surface aesthetic that the poetry and prose prefer, the aesthetic that privileges unambiguous enunciation of the message and that sooner or later privileges rhyme over meaning, and detail over plot, suggests that metaphor does not lend Amor her most effective technique. Though Amor’s later poetry abounds in examples that render felicitous camp readings, I will limit myself to references to *Las amargas lágrimas de Beatriz Sheridan* (1981), which follows German film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s camp classic, *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* (Germany 1972). The work came to Amor’s attention through a theatrical version staged in Mexico City.⁴ To understand why the poems in homage to the actor Beatriz Sheridan who plays tormented lesbian Petra von Kant are as least as campy as Fassbinder’s film, consider the untitled opening sonnet:

Bebes arsénico puro
por tu teléfono largo,
por tu teléfono amargo
aspiras sólo cianuro.

Tu tenso destino duro
es un beso de letargo
como el infierno que cargo
es infernal y es maduro.

Cuando arrasas los cristales
inventas los vendavales,
al revolcarte en el suelo
pones al cielo de duelo.

Y ese beso tan fatal
fue tu sentencia letal.

(You drink pure arsenic
on your long telephone,
on your bitter telephone
you breathe only cyanide.

Your tense difficult destiny
is a kiss of lethargy,
as the hell that I bear

is hellish and is mature.

When you raze the glassware,
you invent storms,
rolling around on the floor
you set the heavens to mourn.

And that so fatal kiss
was your lethal sentence.)

Aside from wondering what a “long” telephone might be, and why anyone would care, and how a kiss could be “so” fatal, the reader is drawn to what under other aesthetics would be unfortunate word choices: describing hell as hellish (*el infierno que cargo/es infernal*) supplies a crowning moment only when entered in a camp contest.

Dallal notes his surprise in Amor’s interest in another woman taking center-stage in his prologue to *Las amargas lágrimas de Beatriz Sheridan*: “Me pregunté cómo una mujer [Amor] que se preocupa tanto de sí misma puede dejarse seducir por otra [Sheridan], cuya labor incommensurable consiste en hacer que la gente olvide de sí misma. Cuestión de inclinaciones” (11) (I wondered how a woman [Amor] who worried so much about herself could let herself be seduced by another woman [Sheridan], whose incommensurable labor consists in making people forget about themselves). In notorious fashion, Amor seems to have promoted a strategic self-centeredness. The poet’s outrageous public performances of herself, including the nude portraits and the scandalously low-cut attire on her television program that featured her recitations of her own and others’ (often religious) poetry reveal the poet’s quirky sense of proportion, which conflates expected hierarchical understandings of big and small, important and trivial. This unstable scale manages to secure the poetic voice’s placement at the center of every scene in an oeuvre that not unexpectedly insists on first-person expression. Poem XVII from *Yo soy mi casa* articulates this disproportion:

De mi esférica idea de las cosas,
parten mis inquietudes y mis males,
pues geoméricamente, pienso iguales
a lo grande y pequeño, porque siendo,
son de igual importancia; que existiendo,
sus tamaños no tienen proporciones,
pues no se miden por sus dimensiones
y sólo cuentan, porque son totales,
aunque esféricamente desiguales. (43)

(From my spherical idea of things,
 spring my anxieties and woes,
 since geometrically, I think as equal
 on the large scale and small, because by being
 they are of equal importance; by existing
 their sizes do not have proportions,
 since they are not measured by their dimensions
 and they only count because they are total
 although spherically unequal.)

This unstable scale rejects the absolute in favor of the relative, and allows Amor to count herself as “total” regardless of her circumstance. In other words, this shifting scale threatens to permit Amor to become everything, rather than just the center. This “spherical idea of things” helps explain the leitmotif of circles; the rejection of sharp lines and edges aids the project of centering the world at any given moment around the poet: it is impossible to cross the line and fall out of favor if Amor conceives of the world as an orb that, by turns, the poet encompasses or that rotates on her axis.

In interviews, Amor returns to these proportionally variable scales that allow her to equipoise the nature of God and that of clothes, jewelry, entertainment, and flaunted vanity. For example, in a conversation with Poniatowska, Amor recognizes and perhaps reconciles the tension between the profound themes that interest her and the superficiality implied in the careful thought that she gives to her appearance on her television program:

Me interesa mucho hablar de los temas inquietantes que colman el espíritu del hombre y lo hago decorada y vestida como si fuese una de tantas mujeres a las que no les interesa más que su superficie. A diferencia de mis cinco hermanas que discurren acerca de hijos, maridos y recetas de cocina, me pongo a hablar de Dios, de la angustia, de la muerte. Me cuido y me esmero para que mis vestidos suplan toda decoración posible en mi programa de televisión. Te diré además que yo no estoy lujosamente ataviada. Esto es un engaño, ya que al final y al cabo en televisión todo es engaño. (*Las siete cabritas* 44)

(I am very interested in talking about the unsettling themes that fulfill man’s spirit and I do it decorated and dressed as if I were one of so many women who are interested in no more than the surface. By contrast to my five sisters who converse about children, husbands, and kitchen recipes, I set myself to talking about God, about anxiety, about death. I take care and I take pains so that my dresses supply all the possible decoration on my television program. I will tell you besides that I am not luxuriously attired. That is an illusion, since in the end everything on television is an illusion.)

Amor describes something of a female impersonation here. Despite the fact that she is female, the poet claims to disguise herself as one of “so many women” interested only in the/their surface. According to Amor’s argument, her tactical, falsely luxurious attire holds the public’s attention, and enables Amor to talk about the implicitly “deep” philosophical matters that interest her, which she opposes with the domestic topics that concern her sisters. What Amor does not do in the above passage is suggest that the “larger” issues correspond to a male realm. Instead, she connects philosophical matters such as God to theatre or performance. This performance tests gender boundaries and directs my attention to the possibilities of queer analysis. Significantly, Poniatowska offers a succinct explanation of Amor’s relationship to God and signals a queer element: “Pita Amor le cantó a Dios y ella misma fue Dios” (31) (Pita Amor sang to God and she herself was God). Amor seems to have approached an ungendered divinity by making it into an image of herself, by looking and sounding divine, in a thoroughly worldly and consciously feminine way. This does not so much make God female or feminine as it makes Pita Amor transcendently artificial. Mexican poet Elsa Cross studies mysticism in Guadalupe Amor’s poetry and determines that when Amor concludes that God is nothing, she comes to a Buddhist-like conclusion that God is to be found in nothingness. However, I suspect that Amor is more literal and less well-traveled than the ashram-residing Cross, and that when Amor writes that God is nothing, she may intimate something along the lines of the paradoxical negation of her own existence that she articulates for Cristina Pacheco in an interview from 1981: “Guadalupe Amor no es realidad, Guadalupe Amor no existe; es un mito inventado por ella misma” (Schuessler 223) (Guadalupe Amor is not reality; Guadalupe Amor is a myth invented by herself).

The comparison of Guadalupe Amor’s self-designed mythology with the more contemporary impersonator of the feminine, Madonna, sheds light on this relationship with the divine. The poet-diva and the pop-diva share a love of costume and the constant flaunting of taboo. The commercially viable tension between religion and sexuality pre-exists both women’s artistic careers by virtue of their Virgin-inspired names. The shock value of playing loose sex, and even loosely sexed, against the sacred Virgin may have less to do with a possible model of male gay discourse—as students of camp often conceive of the aesthetic, and more to do with the inherent queerness of the notion of a Virgin-Mother. While impersonations of Pita Amor make reference to her supposed disdain for *maricones*, Schuessler cites Juan Soriano’s gossipy claims regarding Amor’s ultimately unhappy lesbian trysts (98). Irregardless of the accuracy of that claim, it is evident that Amor was no Catholic conservative, as demonstrated by her eventual, untraditional move from the family home after her father’s death. Her early failure at acting, caused by an inability to be anything other than Pita Amor, led to her

career as perpetually single diva-poet. These unconventional choices find their roots in an intransigent childhood; for example, Amor refused to wear underwear below her Catholic schoolgirl uniform. Possibly, Amor staged her rebellion against normative heterosexuality out of the simple motive of intense self-love, which requires not so much a sexual partner, as an ever-wider public. That public probably expanded exponentially in the absence of Amor's undergarments. Whatever additional motives drive Amor's urge to live so dramatically on the surface of herself, the reason of financial security does not seem to have inspired her performance.

The economic problems that Amor suffered in the later decades of her life reveal her inability to assume responsibility for her career and indicate the difficulties that await any narrative of feminist triumph regarding Amor's façade. Near the end, she would be reduced to selling improvised poems for a few pesos. The generally low quality of those poems discourages me from dwelling on this practice as a case of performance art. However, it proves worthwhile to examine her claims to a natural and thus unmanaged poetic gift. In her prologue to the bestselling *Décimas a Dios* (1953), Amor declares that writing the poems required no effort (8). And, as the prologue to *A mí me ha dado en escribir sonetos* (1981; *I Am Given to Writing Sonnets*) has it, Amor alleges that she began her career almost by accident at age 27 when eyebrow pencil and napkin in hand, she spontaneously drafted the famous poem from her first book, "Casa redonda que tenía . . ." (I had a round house . . .) that also opens her novel. The contrast between artificial appearances and instinctive poetry probably increased Amor's cache as an exception, a queerly natural genius. In this same prologue, Amor describes her face as that of a doll: "Mi portentosa cara de muñeca absorta, formaba un alto contraste con mi genio incipiente y temerario" (8) (My portentous face of an absorbed doll, formed a sharp contrast with my incipient and audacious genius).

The process of creating the poet-diva as a function of imitating a doll appears in the novel *Yo soy mi casa*. There, the narrator recalls how Pita's mother's friends would compliment the girl's eyes, which drove Pita to imitate her favorite doll, Conchis: "Sabido que me miraban tanto, quise imitar a Conchis, que era para mí el sumo de la belleza. Abrí los ojos hasta sentir que las pestañas tocaban mis cejas y fruncí la boca, creyendo que se me vería diminuta" (188) (Knowing that they looked at me so much, I wanted to imitate Conchis, who was for me the height of beauty. I opened my eyes until I felt that my lashes touched my brows and I scrunched up my mouth, thinking that it would look miniature).

This metaphor follows another that I have discussed, the proposal *yo soy mi casa*, I am my home. Both images appear to flow from the pages of the novel to the performance of Amor's life, though both metaphors prove unreliable. In greater detail, the doll from *Yo soy mi casa* is a broken, plastic kewpie that Pita rescues from an older sister's trash. The subsequent

idolization of the mass-produced and ostensibly useless bit of plastic signals the character's taste for kitsch. Pita asks a household employee to repair the doll, and soon she makes Conchis the center of her universe (54). In a scene from Christmas Eve that flaunts camp sensibility, Pita removes the Baby Jesus from his manger and replaces him with Conchis. This act culminates with the tiny diva's fainting fit at the foot of the Christmas tree (304).

The nonlinear structure of Amor's novel places this Christmastime idolatry after the scene in which Pita becomes disenchanted with the doll. To wit, after Pita's frantic parents calm the hysterical girl with the recovered doll, Pita contemplates Conchis dispassionately:

Fueron tan largas las horas en que la [Conchis] creí perdida para siempre; fue tan rotunda mi pena por su ausencia, que cuando regresó mi ilusión por ella estaba agotada. ¡Había muerto mil veces! Fue como si mi niñez hubiese envejecido de pronto. Estaba yo vacía, y vacío se quedó su cuerpecillo de celuloide. (57)

(The hours were so long when I thought she [Conchis] was gone forever; my grief for her absence was so abundant, that when she returned my illusion for her was spent. I had died a thousand times! It was as if my childhood had aged suddenly. I was empty, and empty remained her little celluloid body.)

The idea that Pita and the doll end up empty, and that childhood may have ended for the girl, possibly indicates that Conchis no longer matters since Pita matured and finally has *become* the doll. This notion does not provide the usual progress of a novel of formation, but rather exemplifies a more static process of reification. It is interesting to note that photographs of the adult Guadalupe Amor, and in particular a portrait by Diego Rivera, show her with an exaggeratedly open-eyed stare and a kewpie curl over her forehead. The reasons for becoming both Conchis and the house seem mysterious, since the protagonist sometimes dislikes these entities.

The novel *Yo soy mi casa* offers an ambiguous paragraph regarding the protagonist's perspective on her troubled home/self when she observes the street in the Colonia Juárez from a window in the house: "Sus casas [de toda la larga calle de Abraham González] eran de contradictorios estilos y épocas; sus cuadras no tenían unidad alguna; la única semejanza era que habían sido tocadas por el crimen" (326) (Its houses [all down the long street Abraham González] were of contradictory styles and eras; its blocks did not have any unity; the only similarity was that they had all been touched by crime). Following this sentence, the narrator rapidly asserts that the protagonist's house is the one inviolate exception on the crime-ridden block. Though whatever crimes Amor's house might have suffered remain a mystery, the narrator does emphasize the unpleasant aspects of the home. Near the end of

the novel, the now fourteen-year-old Pita sets foot on the street, alone for the first time in public (343). She contemplates the façade of her house and suddenly perceives that nothing lies beyond it:

¡Detrás de esa fachada no había nada, absolutamente nada! Ni familia, ni humanidad, ni cariño. Yo no dejaba atrás sino un jardín sin plantas y una casa vacía. [...] Una casa que no era sino una fachada, una fachada estática, impenetrable. Una fachada resguardando sombras. ¡Una hipócrita fachada protegiendo el vacío! (346)

(Behind that façade there was nothing, absolutely nothing! No family, no humanity, no affection. I was leaving nothing behind except a yard without plants and an empty house [...] A house that was nothing but a façade, a static, impenetrable façade. A façade shielding shadows. A hypocritical façade protecting the void!)

In the novel *Yo soy mi casa*, the notion that the house is an unsupported façade encourages the suspicion that the protagonist worries that something is lacking behind her own defensive front of personality. The metaphors that figure Pita Román as a doll or house contradict the insistence that below and behind the superficial, there lies only a void.

Through metonymy, however, the poetic voice and narrator may be understood to slide from room to room and surface to surface without falling into the void that lies below the horizontal plane. Following the metonymical organization, an axis of contiguity and displacement sets the doll Conchis and the home in the Colonia Juárez as contiguous, and Amor as always displaced between them. This is another way of referring to the poet's inability to act onstage and the protagonist's relative lack of development: just as the Pita Amor personality overwhelmed the acting roles she was supposed to assume and Pita the protagonist is born a diva, as a potential stand-in for her home or doll, Amor never gives in to metaphor as much as she metonymically places and displaces herself among the elements of her self-determined world. In the manner of a deity, Amor moves through the other without succumbing to it.

The notion of metonymy seems appropriate when thinking of the way Amor lives her femininity and Mexico City: she seeks ways to transgress the borders of the city and the limitations of her feminine role and body, without actually leaving them. That is to say, she at once transgresses and respects limitations by exaggerating them and noting their dependence on appearances. Although Amor could be analyzed in some ways as a feminist figure, it would be erroneous to describe her as a social progressive. She places her individual interests above those of any group.⁵ Even as she performs her sexual independence and artistic intellectuality, Amor apparently prefers to look like a doll, a reminder that what she creates for

others to consume is not quite real, but better than real. Although she largely confines herself to Mexico City, and to certain neighborhoods within it, she is displaced within that territory as someone off-the-map. Whether as Batman's Granny, a seductive (bisexual?) femme, a paradoxical female, female impersonator, or even a living kewpie doll, Amor sustains a performance legible through camp. As long as Mexicans, and now a global Internet audience, celebrate Amor for her cultivated outrageousness, the largely out-of-print poet-diva's legend will live on in the popular imagination.

Colonia Condesa and *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*

Sabina Berman's play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1992) tends to attract inappropriately serious criticism. A review of the compact plot of this play lays the foundation for my point. *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* directs triangular sexual traffic among stylishly cartoonish characters. By the end of the play, historian Adrián briefly considers replacing on-and-off lover Gina with her friend Andrea, who has taken over Gina's apartment because Gina, in turn, has traded Adrián for the younger Ismael, who collaborates with the maquiladora directed by Andrea and Gina. In a move atypical for plays that might be regarded as advancing a feminist or another grand narrative statement regarding women's lives, in this work Berman's characters never seem to achieve much with these exchanges. The false impression of movement is common in the playwright's repertoire. Perhaps *Molière* (1998) epitomizes this spectacular trick, when the dialogue repeats between Racine and Molière from one act to the next without resolving the conflict. The fast-moving though progress-negating technique supplies Berman one commercially successful play after another.

Some criticism of *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* focuses on how the play debunks Mexican nationalist myths and views Gina as representing women's lib for assorted reasons that generally admire her freedom to elect and reject sexual partners (Martínez de Olcoz, Medina, Day). Though the aforementioned critiques are not simplistic, other analyses further complicate the issue by noting that Gina's romantic ideal of orthodox domestic bliss—kids, house, and husband, makes it difficult to see her as a pioneer without closing at least one eye, and these same critics question Ismael's potential as a new Mexican masculinity (Magnarelli, Meléndez, Nieblyski). Both the more faithful feminist analyses and the more skeptical ones seem slightly mismatched to what I view as Berman's camp project. After all, in much of her oeuvre, the playwright's style subordinates theme to action and eschews great dramatic moments for the best joke; these light-hearted priorities signal the futility of applying "weighty" analytic tools,

such as feminism or psychoanalysis, that might presuppose consistent ideology among the characters or themes.

An example of this serious but frustrated critical approach emerges in Dianna C. Nieblyski's article that follows up Sharon Magnarelli's critiques of gendered role-playing in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*. Nieblyski registers the play's unstable characters and its waffling between comedy and melodrama. Both these aspects bother her. I have chosen a climactic paragraph of Nieblyski's critical discontent and emphasize my point with italics:

Berman *cannot bring herself to decide* whether to make Gina a comic stereotype (which she is at times) or a character struggling to resist the weight of symbolic womanhood (which she appears to be at other times). This is the play's *most regrettable flaw*, one that seriously undermines the comic-ironic critique that Berman seeks to sustain throughout the play. *Equally troublesome* is the fact that when Gina does become an agent of comedy, it is as victimized lover or hysterical mother, stereotypes Berman appears to parody *without the sufficient ironic self-awareness* to turn the parody against the culture. (169)

Despite the critic's opening statement lauding the complexity that Berman's "ideological tensions" enable (154), the above passage evinces Nieblyski's disappointment over Berman's perceived vacillation and resultant artistic shortcomings. Similar complaints in Magnarelli's frustration with Ismael also register an almost personal disappointment, as if Berman's work somehow fails a goal that the playwright may not have set for herself but that feminist critics regard as a given.

If Berman's plays do not gracefully correspond to the expected logic of more serious literature, it is possible that she stakes out a campground hospitable to alternative methods of reading. Although I will not focus on her biography, I will mention that Berman ended her marriage to her former theater mentor and for decades since has maintained a professional and personal partnership with Isabelle Tardan, to whom *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* is dedicated. The playwright's relative reticence regarding her personal life indicates to me that she does not open her life to camp as much as she does her art. A diva in the style of Guadalupe Amor appears not in Berman's life but on her stage. Hence, if Gina, according to Nieblyski's fearsomely intelligent though perhaps misaimed evaluation, is a comic stereotype and struggles to resist symbolic womanhood, she sounds somewhat like a female impersonator in the style of Amor. On the other hand, Gina's thin figure and plain short hair as played on stage and in the film by Diana Bracho tempt me to question just how feminine Gina is meant to be. In an intuitive bit of reasoning, I note that when the name "Andrea" or "Adrián" is attached to "Gina," the resulting word sounds like "andrógina"

(androgynous). It seems likely that Gina toys with gender in gestures legible through a camp reading.

Examples of camp in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* include Gina's self-pitying and yet self-celebratory reaction to romantic disappointments. In high style, she consoles herself by swishing about in a Japanese robe, swigging tequila, and swooning to boleros. Even Gina's stereo is glamorous; when Ismael watches her turn on the machine by kicking it, he comments that it needs to be fixed. Gina replies with resigned grandeur, "No, así es" (173) (No, that's how it is). Priscilla Meléndez discusses the play as "parodic," and that observation makes possible one more: Berman's humor is more raucous and unmoored than perhaps the structure of parody alone permits. If parody requires a model that must be ridiculed, at times Berman sticks to this formula, but at others she slips off the already-patterned page and favors the less coherent. I do not wish to suggest that Gina parodies feminist stipulations, such as the rule that women are just as smart as men; rather, I am trying to get at the way that Gina, like sex impersonators, might be understood to transcend the restrictions of gender by celebrating its artificiality and infusing the subordinate feminine role with superficial power over the spectators who desire such performances.

That the audience loves an impersonator is proven in Berman's reliance on the glamorously frivolous female. In many of her plays the glamour girl serves as a foil for the tortured male intellectual, whether he is a historical diva (Freud, Molière) or one of her "A"-list narcissists (Andrés, Adrián, Alberto). The dramatic advantage of these shallow, situationally-determined personalities lies in their theatricality, not in their utility for literary criticism. However, it is not just that the characters imitate gender stereotypes. In the same style as female impersonators who substitute the "part for the whole" approach of metonymy when representing women, Berman's characters flaunt a similar form drag as they imitate humans.⁶ Gina and Adrián adopt one aspect of human behavior and then another—such as (ab)using alcohol and nicotine and threatening to kill themselves—without consequences.⁷ The campy characters cannot really die on stage since they are so artificial that they fall short of being alive there. The characters' emptiness supplies one reason why it is so glamorous, or at least humorous, when they self-medicate with controlled substances. (Andrea even snorts cocaine). When superficial characters take various forms of drugs to escape their own vacuity or to soothe their never-tragic personal dramas, the gesture becomes fabulously redundant.

Awareness of characters' only simulated humanity appears in Berman's surprise that critics at a conference on her work would discuss her characters as if they were people. In a brief essay, she contemplates this possibility with wonder: "¿Son personas?, pensé. Pues sí, me respondí, para ellos son tan personas como yo" ("Tercera llamada" 34) (Are they people?, I thought. Well yes, I answered myself, for them they are just as much persons as I).

This last statement contains an irony, since the previous passage describes Berman's sensation of fictiveness as she enters the conference room; the sensation is one of entering a dramatic scene that she has not written and "being and not being." Agreeing that characters are just as real as an author who feels unreal does not endorse the characters as a faithful representation of humanity. In *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, the playwright seems to joke about her characters' irreality; for instance, Gina complains to Adrián, "¿No podemos platicar como si fuéramos seres humanos?" (165) (Can't we chat as if we were human beings?). Adrián eventually replies that they cannot have a "natural" conversation because, "No hay nada que sea humano y natural al mismo tiempo" (Nothing is human and natural at the same time). Of course, artificiality would not necessarily make them human, as the spectator might note, and Gina presciently replies "Eres imposible" (168) (You're impossible). In her typical, literal-comedic fashion, Berman announces the "impossibility" of her characters and jeopardizes critical projects that would analyze Gina, Adrián, Andrea, and Ismael through theories of human behavior. Each failure to cover up the imitative performance among the characters marks Berman's achievement of outrageous theatricality. This parody of humanity supplies another motive for the discrepancy between academic goals and camp preferences. Under a reading of *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* as a camp piece that laughs at itself as much as at the more earnest audience members, an appropriate analysis of the play might limit itself to the obvious. After all, the superficial level is the only fully functional one in the play. One method for coming at the surface of the work is to contemplate the physical background.

Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda takes place in Gina's apartment, which is located in the Condesa neighborhood of Mexico City, where Berman herself lives and writes.⁸ The play establishes this setting in an introductory stage note, and the film, while vastly inferior to the stage version for its overacting and slow pacing, strengthens the presence of the Condesa backdrop. The film locates Gina's apartment on Avenida México 85, in front of Parque México where eventually Gina, Adrián, and Villa engage in extensive, slapstick dialogue. The end of the film returns Gina and Adrián to the apartment in the Condesa. That neighborhood offers an eclectic zone with a lively "alternative" scene. In the first years of the new millennium, the neighborhood has undergone dramatic commercialization with edgily fashionable boutiques and restaurants opening in formerly residential spaces. During the academic year of 2002–2003, I lived on Condesa-Hipódromo's Amsterdam street, the one that encircles Avenida México. On the rare morning when I got up very early to go the (largely gay) gym, Qi, I would cross paths with the transvestite prostitutes who were calling it a night and heading home. When the sun was shining, the pedestrian traffic would shift, and I often passed by stars in the Mexican media, orthodox Jews, highly accessorized Mexican youth, and once in a while some disoriented tourists

many streets off the intended goal of a trendy restaurant. In addition to the locals, Condesa teems with residents of other zones who visit in hope of consuming assorted varieties of art and flesh. All in all, the neighborhood denotes a live-and-let-live attitude that is at once marginal and increasingly commercial. Hence, the Condesa provides a superb backdrop for camp because the idea of spectacle and alterity is one that the neighborhood embraces, at least for those who can pay for it.

The location of the action in the Colonia Condesa tips off the spectator that the characters in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* are fun, easily consumable, and yet not uninformed or outdated. Any rebellion staged in the Condesa is probably a hip and commodified one having to do with the style of rebellion as much as or more than an actual social upheaval. By placing a stereotypical version of Pancho Villa in Gina's living room in her Condesa apartment, Berman transfers the familiar Revolutionary symbol to a contemporary space that serves to commodify, glamorize, make fun of, and thus enliven all of Mexico from a campy perspective. Much of the play's humor derives from the tension created by containing Villa to the Condesa, and within that area, the apartment of a woman whose son attends Harvard and whose lover returns from a conference in Canada. Unfortunately, the movie returns Villa to the countryside; Gina watches a film of the rebel on horseback in the desert, and Adrián's Villa acts out some of his scenes in the countryside instead of the urban living room. Apparently, given the lesser success of the film, camp in Mexico responds best to theatrical limits that eschew the broadly national backdrop for the tensely local, urban cosmopolitan.

Adrián's passion for Pancho Villa also conforms to a taste for camp, although Adrián himself lacks campy irony and harbors a more sincere fetish that promotes kitsch. For instance, the historian's heartfelt visit to Villa's (empty) tomb recalls a kitsch-loving Elvis fan's pilgrimage to Graceland. What's more, whether for reasons of camp or kitsch, Adrián pays only the most superficial of attentions to Villa's role as a social revolutionary, but dwells on the hero's sexual capacities. When Andrea calls Adrián's published text a novel and says she read it in the restaurant and gift shop VIPs—a tacky chain with pictures of the food on the menus, Berman again indicates the pulp that thickens Adrián's aesthetic (203). Though their politics differ, Revolution-nostalgic Adrián and neoliberal-representing Gina share a low-brow delight in Villa. Gina models for the audience a suitable manner of camping in Adrián's texts when she gets drunk while typing Adrián's manuscript, and when she stays in bed and listens to Adrián's story about Villa over a package of *gomitas*. Because the camper Gina and the kitsch-favoring Adrián seem irremediably flat, further analysis of the play requires sensitivity to metonymy rather than metaphor.

As the title states, the work is *between* Villa and a naked woman, not with one or the other. Given the dubious verisimilitude of the psychologies

at work, it is not certain that a naked “woman” or even Villa really exists among the characters. I have already mentioned Gina’s dubious humanity, and according to the stage directions, Berman’s Villa is the mythic representation from Mexican movies of the 50s, 60s, and 70s. Berman’s highly theatrical characters and their alternately comic and melodramatic plasticity prevent secure knowledge of where the chain of metonymic embodiment will end. That is to say, it is difficult to know if a particular character will come to rest on a point of final significance. For instance, what does Villa mean in a work that denies a sense of historical past and brings the hero as a stereotype to the present? Any answer seems to point to another equally obvious though no more enlightening response: Villa is a myth, and myths are fiction; Villa is unreal. But the spectator already knows that fact from the moment s/he begins watching a campy, surface-hugging play. This resistant-to-profound-meaning horizontality complements what I understand as the rejection of social progress on Berman’s stage. The very blankness below the surface of Berman’s spectacular dramatic effects and splashy dialogue may encourage critics to pin down the play in ways that make Berman’s point for her, and yet the playwright’s ideological slipperiness and even incoherence through the metonymic movements prevent the critic’s certainty regarding the interpretation of Berman’s message. The theatrically pragmatic but thematically loose structure of spectacle based on creeping metonymy causes the meaning of Berman’s play to shift in highly unstable ways.

Berman’s doubts about univocal authority and resolution emerge through laughter, and so the most respectful way to read Berman’s plays may be to stick to the surface, skimming from metonymic slide to slide, and viewing any sign of inconsistent metaphoric depth and failed seriousness as a success. Berman’s work asks for criticism that would renounce applied theories of human psychology and social progress, and simply play along. Part of this play in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* suggests that Condesa harbors some unexpected freedoms, especially freedom from feeling conflicted about *pretending* to be of a certain stripe. Though nothing natural is human, as Adrián states, Berman hints that the Condesa gives a particularly warm welcome to the artificial.

Colonia Polanco and *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*

Sabina Berman and Antonio Serrano are friends, and they share a taste for crowd-pleasing, humorous melodrama. Serrano even directed Berman’s play *Molière*. Like the triangular relationships among characters in *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda*, Serrano’s stage and film versions of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* show the character Tomás returning to Mexico City from his far-

flung travels and rooming with ex-girlfriend Ana and her partner, Carlos. In a fit of kitsch, Serrano neatly completes the triangle with another one: Miguel and Andrea receive a visit from Miguel's ex-girlfriend María, also returned from world travels. A sexual traffic jam ensues: Ana sleeps with Tomás and angers Carlos, and Miguel has sex with María immediately after she overhears him raping Andrea, who fights with Miguel and comes close to sleeping with Tomás. The resultant sexual impasse inspires the six characters to exchange living quarters so that two same-sex groups form with three members to each apartment. Under independent decisions, each group decides to abstain from sex and to live a more contemplative life. Abstinence proves too great a strain for Tomás and Ana, and eventually the same-sex triangles disband, leaving only one reunited couple, Ana and Carlos.

The translation of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* from stage to screen gives Serrano recourse to familiar settings in Mexico City. In the film, the characters reside in facing, that is, horizontally level, apartments on the corner of Newton and Hegel streets in the Colonia Polanco, a setting not specified in the play. The Colonia Polanco boasts a traditionally strong Jewish presence, although today upscale restaurants, trendy bars, expensive boutiques, and luxury car dealerships threaten to overwhelm the once elite residential character of the neighborhood. Guadalupe Loaeza's descriptive *Las reinas de Polanco* (1988; *The Queens of Polanco*) documents the zone's exclusivity, although her ultimate admiration for the elite and shallow señoras deals not so much in camp as kitsch. Serrano's take on Polanco tilts toward camp, in no small part due to Brigitte Boch's trendy set design that arranges supremely chic interiors for both apartments. These characters may behave ridiculously, but their homes reveal an urban fashion sense that implies their ability to filter kitsch through the ironic lens of camp.

Serrano exploits the same dramatic base of glamorous and slightly unstable women as Berman cultivates, and the film *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* even includes a very thin female character who has posed as a cover model. As Jennifer Rathbun points out in her comparison of Serrano's play with his screenplay, the women characters of both works serve as objects of exchange (135). However, Serrano operates as an equal opportunity creator of shallow men and women characters that pass from one lover to another with mercurial attitudes closer to irony than tragedy. The escapism inherent in Serrano's glamorous set reimagines Mexico City as an easier, more pleasant place to live than it usually proves to be. The film transforms what the spectator knows as the increasingly chaotic reality of Polanco into a fantasy of the neighborhood, where lively traffic jams occur because characters run into the street and fight with one another, and where the lower classes cheerfully lend a hand to cleaning and transportation needs without resentment. As with Berman's placement of Pancho Villa in Condesa, Serrano's film brings the rest of the nation to D.F. with incidental shots of

the Papantla flying ritual in Chapultepec Park and indigenous danza at the UNAM (Autonomous National University of Mexico) stadium.

Assorted backdrops in Mexico City serve to telegraph the characters' personalities. Serrano hints at Carlos's and Ana's leftist, intellectual leanings when he places them first at the UNAM, where Ana takes some glamorous photos of athletic, suit-clad men in the stadium, and then at the campus sculpture park. The once aspiring leftist filmmaker and now converted capitalist Miguel, on the other hand, reveals his capitulation to the advertising industry by first appearing in an expensive car, driving by the Universidad Iberoamericana and through the Colonia Santa Fe. This neighborhood is more business-suit oriented than the Condesa, but it is experiencing the same explosion of trendy restaurants, boutiques, and even an upper-upscale mall. Thus, the introductory shots of the Colonia Santa Fe suggest Miguel's success and his and his wife's consumerist cosmopolitanism.

In addition to using Polanco's reputation as casting support for his coolly glamorous characters, at moments Serrano seems to hint that within the fantasy context of the film, Polanco, and even the colorful nation of Mexico as it fits into the space of the city, could offer greater happiness through more secure consumer status and mutual respect earned by virtue of shared residence in an upscale *colonia*. By the end of the film this space of mutual respect demands sacrifice, which reveals its underlying intolerance for poor consumers. With Tomás's suicide, the unemployed and unpartnered character who cannot match his friends' financial means disappears from the scene and characters are returned to a seemingly unthreatened state of material wellbeing, which supplies a sort of cultural capital in itself since it grants the right to continued existence. It is important to stress this economic point because it explains at once the success and the undoing of the film.

David William Foster views Tomás's motivation for killing himself as the ideological conflict between vagabond ways and the other characters' bourgeois conformity. The bourgeois existence that Foster considers stultifying and brands a "neoliberal fantasy land," actually constitutes the attraction of the film, in concert with its rapid pacing (34). The film *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* provides a life-style fantasy for the Mexican audience, complete with an exemplary punishment for improper consumption. Because Serrano's film characters are largely what they consume—drugs, alcohol, clothes, art, sex partners, and so forth—Tomás's material inability to conform to this consumption marks his failure at self-commodification. Since no stable lover will "buy" him, he must eliminate himself. The reason why the characters in the film and play do not seem overly upset with his suicide hinges on Tomás's worthlessness as a commodity and on his possible queerness.

This last assumption relies on stereotype, since there is no other way to attribute a more complexly queer personality to an otherwise flatly

superficial character. In the play, Tomás seeks to reestablish his friendship with Carlos, though in the movie his desire focuses on Ana, Carlos's live-in partner. In both versions of *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, Tomás's suicide prevents him from breaking up the host couple and from admitting that he may harbor queer desires. Under a camp reading of the film, Tomás's bleached-beyond-blond hair, stylized and darker goatee, slim figure, fashion-conscious wristbands, and public affection for a stuffed toy indicate non-normativity. Some of the aforementioned aspects flirt with gay culture. In the film, jokes such as asking for a ride to the Mexican prison, Almoloya, and confessing to former employment as, among other professions, a "chichifo" or "gigolo," give rise to suspicions regarding Tomás's sexual beliefs and his ease or lack of it with them. Given Miguel's successful prostitution of his artistic talent to the advertising industry, the problem with Tomás's sexual sell-out perhaps lies not with the ethics but in the economics of the transaction. Because Tomás either did not make enough profit from his services or did not know how to conserve that profit, he seems to have lost the right to a voice among his friends that would allow him to explore the ramifications of non-normative sexuality.

In the play, Miguel jokes uneasily about Tomás's possible homosexuality, with Tomás's help:

MIGUEL: (*Muy propio también.*) ¿Trae fuego, joven?

TOMÁS: (*Afeminado.*) Sólo por dentro.

MIGUEL: Entonces no se me acerque. Mejor vamos a la estufa. (48)

MIGUEL: (*Very polite as well.*) Do you have a light, young man?

TOMÁS: (*Effeminate*) Only on the inside.

MIGUEL: Then don't come near me. Let's use the stove.

Though Tomás's gay act does not differ significantly from familiar male heterosexual humor in Mexico, precisely that humor sometimes expresses male-to-male attraction and friendship in a socially acceptable manner that (un)masks sincere sexual desire—see Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá bien* (2001) for one presentation of this buddy dynamic. Hence, though Miguel might not want to continue the "joke," Tomás may feel differently. In another scene from the play that the film omits, Carlos seems to claim that Tomás habitually puts on an act:

TOMÁS: ¿Me puedes prestar una maleta? La mía está rota.

CARLOS: ¿Puedes dejar de actuar un minuto de tu vida?

TOMÁS: ¡Claro que sí! (87)

TOMÁS: Can you loan me a suitcase? Mine is torn.

CARLOS: Can you stop acting for one minute of your life?

TOMÁS: Of course I can!

The possibility that Tomás is always acting, that he pretends to be someone he is not, strikes me as an understandable coping mechanism for someone who will not admit to queerness. The play shows Tomás's climactic emotional breakdown as an attempt to hug Carlos, who refuses the embrace and kicks Tomás out of the apartment. The bewildered Carlos then asks Miguel: "¿Por qué [Tomás] se porta así? Él no es el único que sufre, carajo" (90) (Why does [Tomás] behave like that? He's not the only one who suffers, damnit). The nature of Tomás suffering possibly *is* different, as the play suggests by staging Tomás's subsequent suicide over the balcony. The transition from this suicide scene, in which the remaining characters cannot decide if they should believe what they just witnessed, to a scene of perfect normality may incite incredulous laughter when reading the text. The staging of this transition might make it less unreal and thus less propitious to camp. But then again, it might not. As regards the film, Foster notes that the suicide is "simply dropped there circumstantially" (40).

The film *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas* repeats some references to Tomás's potential queerness. Again, Tomás cooks and does the laundry for the other two men, and he listens to the woman-sympathetic tune "La cosecha de mujeres [nunca se acaba]" (Women's Harvest [is never done]) while he irons. The film adds a scene in which Tomás mends a sock. The movie also repeats Tomás's potentially innocent attempt to stop a domestic squabble or, equally likely, what may be a plea for sexual attention, when he strips naked in front of Carlos and Ana. By contrast to the play, in the film Tomás claims a stuffed bear named Cirilo. The film characters accept the toy and even talk to it, and so provide moments of uncomfortable kitsch if the spectator cannot quite camp with the teddy bear. Ultimately, Tomás's presence in Polanco enlivens the comedy and heightens the style quotient, but the neighborhood lives up to its conservative elitist origins when Tomás intentionally plunges down an elevator shaft that the passively onlooking characters know to be out of order. To repeat an approach from my examination of Amor's and Berman's work, if Serrano's camp prefers horizontally-oriented metonymy, the vertical fall assures that the character securely disappears, because vertical arrangements do not function in these works; they lead to nothing. Thus, Serrano's characters can be understood as shifting from side to side, without necessarily enjoying the promise of making great social progress in their lives. The characters' quick return to normality illustrates their easily recuperated self-absorption. Their ease at assimilating Tomás's death feeds off the fantasy of a chic, easier-than-life backdrop of Polanco.

Finally, Serrano's pop music score, in English and Spanish, provides a redundant confirmation of what the audience already knows about the scenes at hand and supplies overt instruction regarding the methods for handling Tomás's perplexingly inconsequential death. The eponymous song *Sexo*,

pudor y lágrimas by Aleks Syntek humorously (for campers) croons: “Sexo, pudor o lágrimas, me da igual” (Sex, shame or tears, it’s all the same to me). In contrast to Syntek’s hyper-sentimental vocals, the lyrics coldly sum up the film’s banality; even the soundtrack does not care which of the titular elements prevails and perhaps neither should the spectator. The style of the film prevails over any particular message and shows how lifestyles can be more fundamental than life itself when pursued in an exaggeratedly flat, hyper-dramatic version of D.F.

The questions that the works by Serrano, Berman, and Amor raise have to do with the neighborhoods they elect as campgrounds. The Zona Rosa and the Colonias Juárez, Condesa, and Polanco center on a minority experience of privilege in Mexico City, which prompts the query, “What do these *colonias* have to do with Mexico?” The answer is everything and nothing. In view of Berman’s smash-hit plays, Amor’s status as a television star and urban legend, and Serrano’s record-breaking box-office receipts for *Sexo, pudor y lágrimas*, it would seem that the audience for this fantasy spans a mass of consumers in Mexico. Perhaps then, the problem for critics when approaching these works rests less on the intrinsic qualities of the works or the nature of their audience, but in critical habits. The city as a flat surface of elites requires a different type of criticism, one that laughs instead of getting mad when expectations for coherent analysis of social justice, national politics, and human progress are not met. The unstable ideologies in Berman’s and Amor’s work, as well as the flippantly materialistic thought in Serrano’s texts, may represent less a betrayal of the professional critic than fidelity to camp.

Against Sontag’s early claim of an apolitical aesthetic, the political urge in camp works to bring politics to the surface, in marked contrast to the tendency of other ideologies to stake claims to “core” values. Unfortunately, “core” or invisible values enable betrayal under the cover of normativity: hence the endless scandals among conservative morality leaders of closeted this-and-that rise to the surface of public knowledge year after year. Because betrayal in camp is a given, owing to the creative energy generated by its easily apprehended contradictions, the hypocrisy of the aesthetic seems superficial, which paradoxically makes it seem less amenable to deeper duplicities. By casting outrageous gender and even human impersonators in the familiar neighborhoods of Mexico City, Amor, Berman, and Serrano make room for alterity without proposing nationalist or feminist or some other accustomed formulaic definition of identity or an equally familiar cry against social problems. As identity and even art become more unfamiliar, so do the *colonias* of Mexico City. These texts may encourage future criticism to rethink the dynamic between the national and the local and between the group and the individual, along with the purpose of “light” art. That project promises to give a more complete understanding of what is entailed in living in Mexico and camping in D.F.

Notes

1. The possibility of camping in Rivas Mercado's excessive and melodramatic presentation of Vasconcelos in *La campaña de Vasconcelos* (1981) is one I have explored elsewhere. Rivas Mercado's frustrated affections for the gay painter Manuel Rodríguez Lozano might have afforded her a glimpse of camp subculture, a probability heightened by Rivas Mercado's active interest in theatre.
2. All translations are by the author.
3. Dallal's reference to Amor in the Zona Rosa reads as follows: "Todos, alguna vez, hemos cuchicheado su nombre con miedo. O la hemos visto, fugaz, en medio de las intermitentes consecuencias de un mediodía en la Zona Rosa" (10) (We have all, at some time, heard her name whispered with fear. Or we have seen her, fleetingly, in the midst of the intermittent consequences of an afternoon in the Zona Rosa).
4. Discussion of camp in Fassbinder's work ranges from a paragraph in the second volume of Paul Roen's *High Camp* (23) to more academically oriented analysis by Jack Babuscio (128–129) and Johannes von Moltke (411).
5. The delight in outrageousness and artificiality inadequately apologizes for many of Amor's unsavory social stances. Her vocal awareness of race and class, along with her insistence on her superiority, suggests that nothing threatens an arbitrarily performed identity like the knowledge that social categorization might shift. Amor appears to have refused, regardless of her often desperate economic situation, to return to the role that she despised as a girl, the *venida a menos* (formerly wealthy female) who suffered the results of the Mexican Revolution and its aftermath that liberated her father of his extensive land holdings, with the exception of the increasingly impoverished house in the Colonia Juárez. Fear of losing control over her simulated supremacy might foster the racist attitudes that Amor did not hesitate to express. Reference to Amor's racism appears in Poniatowska's description of her aunt's unusual assertiveness on the set of her television program in the early 1950s, including Amor's favorite insult: "¡indio!" (*Las siete cabritas* 50). The collection of poems, *Fuga de negras* (1966), underscores Amor's fetishizing of race and her unsophisticated approach to issues of class and skin color.
6. Indeed, the very word "drag" implies horizontal rather than vertical movement. However, Laurence Senelick identifies the term as dating from the early nineteenth century and as originally a reference to braking: "'Putting on the drag', that is, applying the brake on a coach, and used to mean 'slow down', had filtered from the cant of thieves and fences into homosexual slang, to connote the drag of a gown with a train" (302).
7. Gina consciously rehearses her glamorous pose by announcing that just like a "princess" she will commit suicide if Adrián rejects her (180). Later, Adrián hurls himself from Gina's lower-level apartment without causing serious bodily damage.
8. *Muerte súbita* (1988) takes place in a decaying art deco building in the Condesa, in a leitmotif that Vicky Unruh studies. *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* does not play up the urban decay in the neighborhood.

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