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¿Gays, maricas o algo más? La Más Draga's Queer Performance of Mexicanidad at the
Intersection of Art, Nationalism, and Popular Entertainment

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Preface. *¿Quiénes somos?*

I still remember the first time I watched *La Más Draga* (LMD) on *YouTube* in 2021. I started on Season 2 (released in 2019) after watching one of its discontinued side programs, *La Más Nocturna*, an “evening talk show” which brought mostly Mexican celebrities and social media influencers to talk about their lives.¹ I had been familiar with LMD since the time it was released, as I had been a part of queer Latin American social media communities, like those of the popular Mexican duo *Pepe y Teo* or the Venezuelan *La Divaza*, since at least high school.² At the time, I was also a fan of the United States reality drag competition *Rupaul’s Drag Race* (RPDR). I had watched this show completely out of order until I caught up with the live episodes and consumed it on a weekly basis. As I look back, I realize that the real reason I didn’t interact with LMD when it first came out was because it seemed to me like a low-budget mimicry of RPDR. I had never watched a clip of the show myself, so I was unaware of its content/format.

When I finally watched the first episode of Season 2, “La Más Típica”—an episode in which participants had to represent regional costumes and their respective traditional dances—I was enthralled. As a queer Chicax/Latinx student from the United States, my position in relation to what I was watching felt so complicated. On the one hand, I had never seen such a

¹ *La Más Nocturna* is no longer available on *YouTube*, and there is no official information about it, so it was not possible for me to find the dates it aired. LMD has many other of these “side programs,” which seem to maximize profit by creating more content with paid advertisements, as well as more opportunities for sponsors. The largest of these is *El Salseo* (beginning with Season 3), which records backstage interactions on a separate sponsored-set; these are typically recorded during the judges’ deliberation and after a drag has been eliminated. Every episode of *El Salseo* received hundreds of thousands of views, and one corresponds to every episode of the main show. Additional side programs include *Tú La Traes*; *El Velatorio*; *Lo Que No Se Vio*; *Detrás de La Más*; *Espacio LMD*; and *Soy Veneno*.

² *Pepe y Teo* is a gay Mexican comedy duo and *YouTube* series hosts made up of Ricardo José “Pepe” Peralta Escamilla (b. 1988) and César Israel “Teo” Doroteo Godínez (b. 1989). They began making videos in 2011 and are regular hosts/judges on *La Más Draga* and their own Mexican drag competition *Toma Mi Dinerita* (2020–). *La Divaza* is a gay *YouTube* star from Venezuela, also known as Pedro Luis Joao Figueira Álvarez (b. 1998). He has been making *YouTube* videos since 2012.

queer performance of Mexicanidad in my life. I had some gay Mexican icons, notably Juan Gabriel—famously known for his line, *lo que se ve, no se pregunta*—, but this was different. This wasn't like “don't ask, don't tell,” or “lo que se ve, no se pregunta”; this was a queer, glittery, unapologetic reclamation of national culture, of a right to existence—it was *jotería* at its finest, *maricas* doing what *maricas* do. As a queer child of Mexican immigrants from rural Michoacán, “typical” (and sometimes stereotypical) Mexican culture was the bog I had tried to move through my entire life—navigating through dense layers of classism, homophobia, machismo, racism, transphobia, and xenophobia. LMD was re-signifying symbols that I had long associated with these violent discourses, present in my everyday interactions with Chicano/Latino men, including the men of my family. It seemed like a radical gesture towards reckoning with a tradition of erasure and silence: *lo que se ve, no se pregunta*. But still, something didn't feel completely “right” about it.

Even as *La Más Draga* was working to reappropriate Mexican national culture, I couldn't help but feel that it was impossible to fully escape all the implications of returning to masculinist/nationalist tropes. As a scholar, I felt that I needed to be critical of what I was watching; just as I critically engaged with homonormative/nationalist productions in the United States, so too, was I obliged to understand LMD through an analogous framework for the Mexican context.³ While it seemed like the show's reappropriation of national symbols was meant to be a proclamation of queer people's right to exist in Mexico, ultimately I felt that it was a violent assimilation of marginalized communities within the neoliberal nation-building project.

Yet still, I decided to continue watching because regardless of what my scholarly intuition

³ My thinking on homonationalism is especially informed by Jasbir Puar in *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (2007).

critiqued, I felt that LMD was *created for me and people like me*—this is not a common feature of cultural productions from the perspective of a queer, Chicax/Latinx person.

All of this is to say that a study of *La Más Draga* is complicated. It's full of contradictions, and in my case, it is deeply personal. Any “serious” research I have undertaken about LMD has been heavily intertwined with my positionality as a queer, Chicax/Latinx scholar based in the United States, where I reside at the intersection of consumer, critic, fan, and researcher. My methods for approaching LMD ranged from “communal viewing,” in which I watched and commented on episodes alongside one or more friends; close “readings” (or viewings) in which I analyzed short segments of the shows for anecdotal evidence; and fan-participant observation, in which I conducted field research in Mexico City at “La Más Orgullosa,” a pride event held at the *Maraka Salón* in June 2022, as well as interactions with participants and other drags in Mexico City queer night clubs. The bulk of this work was conducted precisely at this blurry line between fan and researcher, consumer and investigator, cultural native and foreigner, as I straddled the many worlds—and translations—between the “here” (US queer cultures) and the “there” (Mexican/Latin American queer cultures): a “*ni de aquí, ni de allá*” *marica* dialectics. And so, while this research is heavily backed by cultural, economic, political, and social histories, so too, it is informed by my personal experiences with the show. Hence, as the title suggests, this thesis is a reckoning with the troubles of queer, Chicax/Latinx scholarship—namely, the question of identity. Where do our allegiances stand? Do we wish to be included if it means losing certain parts of ourselves, of assimilating the same discourses which have inflicted so much violence upon our bodies and psyches? By exploring

some of the ambivalences at the center of *La Más Draga*, I hope to resolve one question:

¿Quiénes somos? Gays, maricas, or something else...?

Introduction. *La Jotería* in a Nationalist, Neoliberal Mexico

Tradition is a vital element in culture; but it has little to do with the mere persistence of old forms. It has much more to do with the way elements have been linked together or articulated.

These arrangements in a national-popular culture have no fixed or inscribed position, and certainly no meaning which is carried along, so to speak, in the stream of historical tradition, unchanged. Not only can the elements of “tradition” be rearranged, so that they articulate with different practices and positions, and take on a new meaning and relevance. It is also often the case that cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different, opposed traditions meet, intersect.⁴

It is 13 December 2022 in Mexico City. A rainbow of wigs, rhinestone outfits, and queer extravagance fills the *Arena de la Ciudad de México*, as more than eight thousand people—and hundreds of thousands more online—are gathered to watch the finalists of *La Más Draga 5* vie for the title of *La Más Draga de México*, as well as a massive cash prize.⁵ The only thing visible on the stage at this point is a large, illuminated representation of a Mayan statue. Then, a large eye appears on screen, followed by the figure of a Mesoamerican pyramid, graphic stars and butterflies, and finally the green, white, and red colors of the Mexican flag spread across enormous screens. Shirtless men, in leather outfits, pour from the center of the stage with the instruments that form the repertoire of Mexican regional music: accordion, percussion set, trombone, trumpet, and tuba. One by one, the entire cast of Season 5 parades onto the stage, also dressed in the colors of the flag. The crowd cheers wildly at this flamboyant performance of queer Mexicanidad, in which the symbols of the nation are covered in glitter and rhinestones,

⁴ Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 450.

⁵ *La Más Draga*, “La Gran Final.” (Season 5)

made into the stuff of maricas. This scene is the largest gathering of people in Mexico for the purposes of supporting queer drag culture; a major feat completed in a stadium whose inaugural performance in 2012 was led by the iconic Mexican singer Luis Miguel. This level of public, queer representation should not go unnoticed, for this is not an ordinary scene in Mexico, or even around the world. Where else do thousands of people gather, paying high amounts of money, to view drag performances on national stages, stages on which the biggest Mexican singers have performed? This grandiose representation of drag in Mexico is one of the ways in which LMD is working to build acceptance and diversity into the fabric of the nation, mobilizing Mexican traditions as tools for queer inclusion.

Still, there are always problems with representation. Before the finale, there was the *alfombra morada* (a queer twist on the red carpet), in which celebrities and drags from the previous season posed in ostentatious clothes. Little did the cheering crowd know that during the alfombra morada, the then-reigning queen, Rebel Mörk (winner of Season 4), made a major critique of LMD and its producers, flaunting a goth-style, black and white attire reading “No les importa la salud mental”—or the producers don’t care about our mental health.⁶ This came after much criticism from past queens that the producers are more interested in creating a successful show than they are about supporting Mexican drag; Mörk has been outspoken about this and, for the most part, has refused to participate in LMD’s promotional videos and events since winning the crown. These two juxtaposed scenes of *queer representation* and *protest against commercialization* reveal some of the tensions at the heart of LMD. Namely, when we speak of commercial cultural productions, what is the line between “fair” representation and exploitation?

⁶ TV_Jotas, Twitter Post.

La Más Draga (LMD, 2018–present, five seasons), born as a small, underfunded project in 2018, has quickly become a commercial hit among LGBTQ+/queer communities in Mexico, Latin America, and among Spanish-speakers across the world.⁷ LMD is a reality show and drag competition produced by the Mexican company *La Gran Diabla Producciones* in which drags (queens, kings, non-binary royalty, and even “bios”) compete for the title of La Más Draga de México (or Mexico’s Top Drag Queen).⁸ Each week, the *feminosas* (participants) compete in different mini-challenges and runway shows; there is a weekly winner (*La Más*), who receives a cash prize, and one (and sometimes two) losers (*La Menos*), who must leave the program. This continues until the end of the show, when the finalists compete in the grand finale among a packed audience. In Season 5, La Más Draga de México received a cash prize of \$500,000 Mexican pesos; \$80,000 Mexican pesos worth of makeup products from the company *Nyx*; one year of free Internet connection from TotalPlay; and a designer crown by famous Mexican jeweler, Gustavo Helguera. The show’s long list of corporate sponsors facilitated such a grand prize, as well as the many expenses that went into the show, which increases its budget significantly every season; these include BePrepared, DejaVu, Nyx Cosmetics, PrideMX, TotalPlay, Transportes Canseco, VivaAerobus, and Zoé Water, among others.

⁷ A quick look at the view count on their *YouTube* channel, *La Más Draga* (488k subscribers), shows how every episode in their latest season (Season 5) received hundreds of thousands of views, with an average view count of approximately 903,330 views across the ten main episodes (excluding side episodes and the live-streamed grand finale). As of the writing of this thesis, LMD is currently in the live audition phase for Season 6 (2023).

⁸ Most commonly, “drag queen” refers to a cisgender man who performs hyperfemininity, and “drag king” refers to a cisgender woman who performs hypermasculinity. There are also trans* drags queens/kings, who perform the same gender with which they identify. A bio-king or bio-queen is a cisgender person that does drag—or hyperbolizes—the gender with which they identify. Importantly, there are also trans* and non-binary drags, who refuse these categorizations altogether. In LMD, there have been bio-queens (Alexis 3XL, Season 2), bio-kings (Memo Reyri, Season 3), and non-binary drags (La Morra Lisa and Paper Cut, Season 4 and 5). This was not the case for a long time in the main branch of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* (RPDR, US), with the exception of Scaredy Kat in *Drag Race UK*, Season 1. Another notable example is Maddy Morphosis from Season 14 of RPDR, the show’s first openly heterosexual male drag queen. Some drags contest the label of bio-king or bio-queen—for its emphasis on biological sex—and just prefer the terms drag queen and drag king, regardless of their sex assigned at birth.

The typical structure of each episode is as follows: (1) the *title sequence*, which consists of Indigenous patterns and textiles, images of *Quetzalcóatl* (the Aztec/Mexica feathered serpent god) rendered through *nopales* (Mexican cactus), the grand Mesoamerican pyramids, as well as now-representative symbols of Mexicanidad, including the *magüey* plant and skulls; (2) the *jholi, holi, holi!* in which the episode's theme is explained or a mini-history of pertinent details from a relevant era are covered; (3) the *dressing room* or *backstage*, where the drags get ready for their challenges, discuss topics relevant to the LGBTQ+ community (like chosen families and AIDS prevention), argue and throw *fuck-yous* (the word used for insults among participants, loosely translated as “shade”), as well as have private, emotional confessionals; (4) the *runway*, where drags will show off their outfits and sometimes dance, sing, or act; and lastly, (5) the *judges' critiques* and (6) *lip-sync battle*, in which “La Más” and “La Menos” are revealed, and the two bottom drags must compete for their spot in the competition. Photographs of eliminated drags are placed on the “*drag altar*,” an installation modeled after the traditional *Día de Muertos* (Day of the Dead) altar—another symbol of the show's investment in dominant understandings of Mexicanidad. Throughout my analysis, in order to understand the varied and contradictory meanings of these queer performances of Mexicanidad, I employ three interrelated concepts or frameworks: (1) homonationalism, (2) post-revolutionary and neo-Mexicanist production, and (3) popular/high culture. I argue that these three positions allow us to interrogate the specific work of LMD as an ambivalent expression of queer Mexicanidad, while also allowing for exploration of other ideas relevant to Mexico more generally, including assimilation, misogyny, neoliberalism, necropolitics, racism, and transphobia, among other concepts.

Homonationalism in Mexico

According to its reviewers, the program is a Mexican pop adaptation of the US-based reality drag competition produced by World of Wonder, *RuPaul's Drag Race* (RPDR, 2009–present, 15 seasons). RPDR, hosted by one of the most famous drag queens in the US and internationally, RuPaul Andre Charles (b. 1960), features a similar format in which (mostly) drag queens from around the US compete for the title of America's Next Drag Superstar, through different challenges that include makeup, photoshoots, lip-syncs, dancing, singing, musicals, and other kinds of entertainment. The show has gained global popularity—best exemplified by its international “colonization” of the drag world—which has resulted in significant attention from the academy, with at least four critical anthologies published on topics as varied as RPDR's visibilization of marginalized communities to how the show participates in the neoliberal commodification of marginalized cultures.⁹ The trans* feminist critic Anna Antonia Ferrante, for example, writes about the RPDR's representation of drag on reality TV:

It is certainly no coincidence that RPDR's format is that of a talent show; this appears to be the congenial format of the *mise en place* of neoliberal modernity. The very idea of competition is in line with a market ideology, which manifests itself in terms of annihilating competition [...] From this perspective, the representation of drag as portrayed through RPDR's format seems to comply with the lexicon of a neoliberal hegemonic representation. This is the perspective I use to define the techniques of discipline that occur throughout RPDR as the evolution of a homonormative regime of visibility, a regime which radically transforms reality or, better yet, empties the reality of drag of its radicalism.¹⁰

⁹ See Daems, *The Makeup of RuPaul's Drag Race*; Brennan and Gudelunas, *RuPaul's Drag Race and the Shifting Visibility of Drag Culture*; Kempt, Volpert, and Bornstein, *RuPaul's Drag Race and Philosophy*; and Crookston, *The Cultural Impact of RuPaul's Drag Race*.

¹⁰ Ferrante, “Super Troopers,” 156.

She examines how RPDR converts drag communities' radical culture into a product to be consumed in a neoliberal, open market; it makes of a marginalized community, in the words of Jasbir Puar, a "homonormative" product, or a program in which "queer bodies, turned tame by hierarchy and segregation, can work within processes of producing [hegemonic] meaning, as well as in consuming it."¹¹ The result is an underground community's violent—even if ostensibly innocuous—incorporation into the heteronormative ideal. This is closely related to Puar's understanding of homonationalism or homosexual sexual exceptionalism, which "does not necessarily contradict or undermine heterosexual sexual exceptionalism; in actuality it may support forms of heteronormativity and the class, racial, and citizenship privileges they require [...] Homonormativity can be read as a formation complicit with and invited into the biopolitical valorization of life in its inhabitation and reproduction of heteronormative norms."¹² Thus, homonormativity does not combat heteronormativity or heterosexual exceptionalism but works to bolster other forms of normative identities or "privileges" through an exclusive inclusion of the homonormative subject. This is quite relevant to the context of LMD, which, in its attempt to include queerness within the nation, actually reinforces "class, racial, and citizenship privileges" in its problematic bolstering of upper-class, urbanite, White Mexican culture (the "gay" in "*¿Gays, maricas o algo más?*"), as well as its appropriation of Indigeneity.

Without the same level of popularity as its US counterpart, *La Más Draga* has not received any critical academic analysis; all writing about the show is limited to newspaper articles and online blog posts, as well as informal social media discussion forums on platforms

¹¹ Ferrante, "Super Troopers," 156.

¹² Puar, "Introduction," 9.

like *Twitter* and *YouTube* comment sections.¹³ Still, within the framework developed around RPDR in relation to commodification and the appropriation of queer practices made digestible for mainstream (cisheterosexual) audiences, we can locate some of the tensions that reside, local and transnationally, within *La Más Draga*. I am interested in exploring, similar to what Ferrante describes of RPDR, how LMD “dilutes” the radicalism of Mexican drag communities to create an attractive and consumable product for hegemonic (cisheterosexual) communities in Mexico, the US, and globally. In other words, both RPDR and LMD, in their own contexts, serve as cultural mediators or stakeholders buying into the projects of hegemony, namely masculinist nationalism. They work to incorporate certain (acceptable) sectors of the LGBTQ+ community into the dominant heteronormative citizenship; this is the very basis of homonationalism.

This is also closely related to Sergio de la Mora’s work in *Cinemachismo*, which describes the potential to fit queerness into the framework of Mexican cultural nationalism: “Machismo needs the *joto* to define and affirm itself as much as it needs a clingy woman, a fact that is continuously acted out not only in cinema and popular culture but also in everyday life [...] There is a space for homosexuality in Mexican culture but that space is fraught with tensions and contradictions.”¹⁴ Similarly, literary scholar Robert McKee Irwin notes that “notions of both Mexican masculinity and male homosexuality are riddled with paradox. Masculinity is achieved and bolstered through symbolic (or real) homosexual acts, which do not imply a homosexual

¹³ It’s interesting to note the analogy between RPDR/Hollywood and LMD/Mexican national cinema. The film critic Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado says of this relationship: “Still, the underlying problem remains the overwhelming ability of Hollywood films and distributors to colonize Mexico’s vast market at the expense of the national industry.” I make a similar connection between the US media’s colonization of international entertainment circuits and the continuous domination of hegemonic media powers, or how Hollywood/RPDR continues to subjugate Mexican cinema/LMD. Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 210.

¹⁴ de la Mora, “Introduction,” 5.

identity. However, the fact that the positionality of the participants in such acts is unstable and always suspect, with the fucker always a hair's breadth away from becoming the fucked, implies that homosexuality is always lurking beneath the surface of this masculinity."¹⁵ Additionally, Héctor Domínguez-Ruvalcaba reminds us that the relationship between homophobia and homosociety/homosociality is slippery: "While misogyny and homophobia construct national otherness, heterosexual masculinity occupies the center stage, that is, the collective's desirable self, represented as the homosocial gathering of men. Homosociety and homophobia are the two faces of Mexican masculinity. The former corresponds to the desirable man and the latter to his rejection. The two depend on each other, to nurture the content of moral structures and to generate rationales and simulacra of sense to confirm the necessity for patriarchy."¹⁶ These two seemingly opposing poles are mutually imbricated and reinforce each other, so that machismo/patriarchy is reaffirmed by the very existence of the queer or feminine subject to mark as its Other. On the level of the nation, the *joto* (faggot) is the necessary limit of masculinist intelligibility; it is the foil from which machismo can come to understand itself as a legible, legitimate, and necessary structure of oppression on micro- (interpersonal) and macro-political (national) levels. The *joto*, then, represents Mexican abjection. And US queer theorist Judith Butler explains that "the abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject."¹⁷ For Butler, the very notion of subject formation

¹⁵ McKee Irwin, "Introduction," xxviii.

¹⁶ Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, "Introduction," 4.

¹⁷ Butler, "Introduction," xiii.

requires an exclusive matrix by which abject bodies are produced as the limit of autonomy, subjectivity, and cultural intelligibility.¹⁸ I ask, then, in what ways does LMD make the move away from abjection for certain sections of the Mexican queer community? How does it work to incorporate queerness/*jotería*—in other words, to *jotear a México*—into the national cultural imaginary, thus affording itself cultural intelligibility? What is at stake in this fraught queer performance of Mexicanidad?

Studying LMD and homonationalism within the Mexican context not only elucidates the work that the show does to incorporate LGBTQ+ subjects within normative citizenship, but it also reveals how intimately concepts of sex and sexuality are tied to the imagined national community. For some Mexican studies scholars, sex is not just one lens to approach ideas of the nation and nationalism—it is the very foundation of Mexican national thought, at least throughout the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. Among the most prominent examples of the relationship between sex and the nation is the canonical text *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950) by the Mexican author, Octavio Paz (1914–1998), a Premio Miguel de Cervantes (1981) and Nobel Prize (1990) laureate. In this literary treatise on the Mexican psyche, written in the post-revolutionary period, Paz makes astounding observations about homosexuality, the (non-)role of women in society, and the crisis of Mexicanidad in the face of US domination.¹⁹ Most important to our understanding is his development of a dialectic between *lo abierto* (open) and *lo cerrado* (closed). For Paz, this open-closed dialectic is at the very center of what it means to be Mexican; the Mexican man (and nation)—for this is the subject that most interests

¹⁸ For more on Butler’s discussion of abject bodies and vulnerability, see Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics.”

¹⁹ For an equally important precursor in the study of the Mexican psyche and masculinity, see Ramos, *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*. For a later study, see Bartra, *La jaula de la melancolía*.

him—must be closed to the outside world, never penetrated by the exterior. This is a quality that, in his opinion, rules every basic behavior and cultural aspect of Mexican society:

El lenguaje popular refleja hasta qué punto nos defendemos del exterior: el ideal de la “hombría” consiste en no “rajarse” nunca. Los que se “abren” son cobardes. Para nosotros, contrariamente a lo que ocurre con otros pueblos, abrirse es una debilidad o una traición. El mexicano puede doblarse, humillarse, “agacharse,” pero no “rajarse,” esto es, permitir que el mundo exterior penetre en su intimidad. El “rajado” es de poco fiar, un traidor o un hombre de dudosa fidelidad, que cuenta los secretos y es incapaz de afrontar los peligros como se debe. Las mujeres son seres inferiores porque, al entregarse, se abren. Su inferioridad es constitucional y radica en su sexo, en su “rajada,” herida que jamás cicatriza.²⁰

Paz uses popular linguistic codes to highlight exactly how language and culture represent the idea of the macho as impenetrable. Homosexuality is tied up in all of this national-sexual anxiety, as well. Because Paz makes room for homosexuality within his argument: “Es significativo, por otra parte, que el homosexualismo masculino sea considerado con cierta indulgencia, por lo que toca al agente activo. El pasivo, al contrario, es un degradado y abyecto [...] Como en el caso de las relaciones heterosexuales, lo importante es ‘no abrirse,’ y, simultáneamente, rajarse, herir al contrario.”²¹ Here again, the messy boundary between homophobia/homosociety is revealed, as machismo permits the “active,” “closed,” and “penetrating” homosexual male subject to fit within the borders of acceptability. This, taken to the level of the nation, speaks to the period’s Mexicanidad in crisis, in fear of being penetrated by the outside world.

And beyond the “closed” quality of the Mexican man, lie the extremes of machista sexual violence. Paz argues that the Mexican man must not just be closed, but he must also be an active

²⁰ Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 35–36.

²¹ Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 47.

and sexually violent subject, rendered through the trappings of *chingar* (to fuck). Paz describes *chingar* and the *chingón*—and also, by necessity, the opposite, the *chingada/o/x*—as follows:

Es un verbo agresivo [...] El verbo denota violencia, salir de sí mismo y penetrar por la fuerza en otro. Y también herir, rasgar, violar—cuerpos, almas, objetos—destruir [...] En suma, *chingar* es hacer violencia sobre otro. Es un verbo masculino, activo, cruel: pica, hiere, desgarrar, mancha [...] Lo *chingado* es lo pasivo, lo inerte y abierto, por oposición a lo que *chinga*, que es activo, agresivo, y cerrado. El *chingón* es el macho, el que abre. La *chingada*, la hembra, la pasividad pura, inerme ante el exterior. La relación entre ambos es violenta, determinada por el poder cínico del primero y la impotencia de la otra. La idea de violación rige oscuramente todos los significados. La dialéctica de “lo cerrado” y “lo abierto” se cumple así con precisión casi feroz.²²

Queer Mexican studies scholar Xiomara Verónica Cervantes-Gómez asserts the connection between the national and sexual anxieties in twentieth century Mexico, as represented by Paz: “Paz’s colorful description of the Mexican as a national subject, through the sexual imagery rendered by the action of *chingar*, operates to sexualize nationalism; at least insofar as he perceives there to be a cultural crisis in twentieth-century Mexico warranting a reassessment of what it means to act Mexican to compete with other modern nations.”²³ She argues that the relationship between sex and nationalism is central to our “reassessment of what it means to act Mexican to compete with other modern nations,” all of which includes the homosexual subject as members of the homonormative regime—or, for those who cannot or refuse to conform, abject bodies, marking the limits of society. This is not dissimilar to what the scholar of Mexican performance studies Laura G. Gutiérrez describes of “political cabaret”: “While mass media do much to occlude the relationship between intimate sexual practices and governmental policies, as well as national and transnational politics, and mainstream cultural production seldom pays

²² Paz, *El laberinto de la soledad*, 90–91.

²³ Cervantes-Gómez, “Paz’s Pasivo,” 333.

attention to these connections, these artists, consciously or not, present the spectator with the possibility of never entirely disengaging sex/sexuality from political culture precisely by nudging us into a process that ‘rethinks intimacy.’”²⁴ So, in the context of LMD, the concept of homonationalism—or the relationship between the nation, nationalism, sex, and sexuality—can help us to unravel the complicated terrain the show inhabits in relation to machismo. We can begin to interrogate whether LMD, like Gutiérrez suggests of mass media, “occlude[s] the relationship between intimate sexual practices and governmental policies,” or whether it brings them to the fore, marking the fractured relationship between Mexican state projects and queer communities.

Post-Revolutionary and Neo-Mexicanist Cultural Productions

While LMD, to a certain extent, adapts RPDR’s structure as a model to imitate—especially in order to be successful outside of Mexico and Latin America—it is also a point from which LMD ruptures. In my analysis, I do not seek to sloppily apply frameworks developed around RPDR onto LMD, as the contexts for the cultural nationalisms are vastly different, even if interrelated through questions of imperialism and “free trade” (NAFTA). Instead, I will use discussions of RPDR as models to understand how homonationalism is applied more generally to the phenomenon of cultural nationalism. Perhaps one of the most prominent Mexican cultural critics of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries Carlos Monsiváis (1938–2010) defines cultural nationalism as follows: “La expresión cultural del nacionalismo se propone dotar al país de formas expresivas que, al serle propias, configuren la

²⁴ Gutiérrez, “Introduction,” 12.

fisonomía espiritual y la identidad transferible, y obtengan el reconocimiento internacional y las enmiendas políticas concretas.”²⁵ This is an apt description of what I hope to demonstrate in the queer Mexican context, as LMD—like RPDR in the US—appropriate elements of so-called “national culture” that have been deemed, on local and international levels, as near metonyms for the nation itself. This is relevant because Mexico has a strong tradition of cultural nationalism that stretches back at least the nineteenth century during the Independence wars, and especially in the twentieth century during the post-revolutionary period.

Post-revolutionary cultural productions like the “Mexican school” of the 1920s or the Golden Age of Mexican cinema, roughly beginning in the 1930s, were deeply tied to a period marked by ongoing crises after the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1920. These productions are tied to the nation-building project in which culture, especially the fine arts and popular entertainment, were mobilized to consolidate a new idea of the nation based on an idea of *mestizaje*. Cultural productions during this period are highly didactic, seeking to reformulate what it means to be Mexican after the Revolution. The figures and symbols that come out of this period have become inseparable from the image of Mexico throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. These national symbols were later bolstered by the neo-Mexicanist movement, beginning in the late 1980s. Many scholars have argued that neo-Mexicanist cultural productions, which returned to the myths and symbols of the post-revolutionary period, were intimately tied to the promotion of neoliberal policy, especially in the negotiations of NAFTA and related free trade initiatives. The art historian María Noel Secco, for example, argues that neo-Mexicanist cultural productions are imbricated in a rethinking of national identity, brought

²⁵ Monsiváis, *Historia mínima de la cultura mexicana en el siglo xx*, 211.

about by the 1982 economic crisis and increasing liberalization: “[The crisis] provoked a growing distrust in the political system that slowly opened the way during the decade of the eighties to the acceptance of the economic reforms enforced by president Carlos Salinas de Gortari in his desire to promote the liberalization of trade barriers with the U.S. The move towards the dissolution of the traditional official protectionism provoked a crisis of nationalism, which called for the reaffirmation of the symbols that were associated to this construction of nationality and, by extension, of national identity.”²⁶ Thus, neo-Mexicanist productions, like post-revolutionary art and entertainment, reveal how nationalism and neoliberalism are tied together. Moreover, applied to the context of LMD and other queer cultural productions, we can see how cultural diplomacy and neoliberalism is more than an economic policy; it is an ideology with parameters on how to appropriately behave. Mexican anthropologist Eduardo Nivón Bolán makes a similar argument about neoliberal ideology: “La discusión de los últimos años ha llevado a considerar esta condición como la asunción de una nueva racionalidad, de un modo de juzgar la sociedad, las persona y la propia condición individual de estar en este mundo.”²⁷ Some theorists have gone as far as to say that talking about neoliberalism in the twenty-first century is not sufficient; we have surpassed the limits of “free trade” as such. The Mexican trans* feminist critic Sayak Valencia, for example, argues that “gore capitalism,” or the “underside of neoliberalism,” is a more apt descriptor for what Mexicans experience in their everyday lives. She defines gore capitalism as follows: “derramamiento de sangre explícito e injustificado (como precio a pagar por el Tercer Mundo que se aferra a seguir las lógicas del capitalismo, cada vez más exigentes), al altísimo porcentaje de vísceras y desmembramientos, frecuentemente

²⁶ Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 14.

²⁷ Nivón Bolán, “¿Qué es ser neoliberal?,” 133.

mezclados con el crimen organizado, el género y los usos predatorios de los cuerpos, todo esto por medio de la violencia más explícita como herramienta de *necroempoderamiento*.”²⁸

Frameworks like globalization and neoliberalism are not sufficient to capture the level of violence and necropolitical control at the center of Mexican society; they obfuscate the dark reality of “life under neoliberalism.”

Still, to avoid gross generalizations, this chapter considers the foundational discourses in Mexican nationalist cultural productions, with a keen awareness of their relationship to the nation’s history and contemporary political-economic condition. I attempt to situate LMD’s content and its historical-cultural, political-economic context in a line of Mexican cultural productions that respond to the threat of foreign penetration, while, at the same time, arguing that it participates in the neoliberal commercialization of marginalized communities. For this analysis, I will use a panoramic methodology with regard to content, which instead of employing a thorough analysis of a small number of episodes, focuses on specific moments that highlight my argument from various episodes and across different seasons; this method of meta-analysis highlights how, from the production level to that of the participants, there exist tensions between “subversive” and “hegemonic” discourses. This is particularly relevant in the context of performing Mexicanidad, such that bodies in movement often evade, or reconfigure, the discourses from which they arise. While I apply a deconstructionist approach to LMD, which questions the basis of its supposed radicalism, I do not want to preclude the ways in which individual participants critique or diverge from “official” discourses or, in Butler’s words, the

²⁸ Valencia, “Introducción,” 15.

“regulatory law.”²⁹ This is where popular culture and performance, as opposed to other elite art forms like the fine arts, allow for more analytical fluidity, as scholar of Mexican performance studies Manuel R. Cuellar notes: “Unlike the representations of Mexican nationalism crystallized through muralism or the novel of the Mexican Revolution, to name two recurrent examples, the performance of *lo mexicano* by and through bodies in motion always runs the risk of signifying—or rather gesturing, literally and metaphorically—something different.”³⁰

Occasionally, I will also make reference to the scenography and visual aspects (i.e. title sequence and end credits) to highlight elements of neo-Mexicanism, as well as audience reception through platforms like *Twitter* and interaction on *YouTube*. The triple analysis of content, context, and reception reveal how LMD responds to the neoliberal, nationalist crisis of similar Mexican cultural productions: namely, how to be Mexican, or how to *perform* Mexicanidad, in the face of foreign domination.

“Popular Entertainment” vs. “High Culture”

One of the important questions at play in LMD, as a form of queer art and popular entertainment, is: What *genre* does it belong to? Is it a form of “high culture” in its use of performance and concepts related to the fine arts, with episode themes focusing on Mexican muralism, plastic arts, and high fashion; or is it a form of “popular entertainment”/nightlife, best left in the cabaret or the club?³¹ As the anecdote that opens this thesis demonstrates, *La Más*

²⁹ Butler notes that subjects can reconfigure the regulatory “law” or “ideal” through failed gender performances: “Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.” Butler, “Introduction,” xii.

³⁰ Cuellar, *Choreographing Mexico*, 29.

³¹ For an account of Mexican muralism and the post-revolutionary state, see Coffey, *How a Revolutionary Art Became Official Culture*; and Flores, *Mexico’s Revolutionary Avant-Gardes*.

Draga has not been limited to the club, the underfunded *YouTube* series, or the small stage; in fact, the finale for Season 5 was held at the Arena Ciudad de México, a stadium with a capacity of over 20,000 people, marking how public of an event the show staged for the drags. This kind of finale works to distinguish drag as a form of art that merits massive audiences. Thus, LMD straddles the uncomfortable border between “high culture” and “popular entertainment” in its *mélange* of artistic and entertainment legacies.

In this study of *La Más Draga*, especially when it comes to the definition of “genre,” I turn to the work of Jamaican-British sociologist Stuart Hall on popular culture. Putting the work of a Black, Caribbean socialist in conversation with scholars of Mexican studies allows us to account for the messiness of what cultural productions “mean” to different people, as well as the different—and at times contradictory—effects they produce in the social fabric. Hall understands the “popular” as a cultural battleground in which those in power vie for defining what constitutes “popular” vs “high” culture:

What is essential to the definition of popular culture is the relations which define ‘popular culture’ in a continuing tension (relationship influence, and antagonism) to the dominant culture. It is a conception of culture which is polarized around this cultural dialectic [...] It has at its center the changing and uneven relations of force which define the field of culture—that is, the question of cultural struggle and its many forms. Its main focus of attention is the relation between culture and questions of hegemony.³²

This understanding of the popular as a “cultural struggle” should be readily applied to the case of LMD, which also seeks to redefine notions of “high” vs. “popular” culture; of “dominant” vs. “marginal” art; of the things of the nation vs. the things of the *jotos*. LMD does so precisely by reappropriating or queering elements of Mexican tradition that are intimately linked with

³² Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 449.

machismo. And, as the epigraph of this thesis by Hall notes, “tradition” is also a slippery concept, as it is constantly rearranged and shaped to fit national-popular culture. He argues that “cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different, opposed traditions meet, intersect.”³³ As such, I think LMD is precisely one of the grounds for “cultural struggles,” in which “opposed traditions meet” (i.e. the queering of machista tropes). I ask then, how does LMD’s reappropriation of Mexican “traditions” play a role in this cultural renegotiation for the terms of (queer) citizenship?

I. Welcome to the World of (Mexican) Drag

Amid the dominance of US and European programs like RPDR and the *Drag Race* universe (RPDR *All Stars*, *Drag Race Canada*, *Drag Race UK*, *Drag Race Spain*, *Drag Race Holland*, *Drag Race Thailand*, *Queen of the Universe*, among many others), LMD seeks to amplify the art of Mexican drag, such that every episode is thematically organized around different elements of Mexican culture, which, as the shows’ refrain explains, “no sólo nos inspiran a jotear, sino también a crear *arte*.” The explicit connections between the act of queering (jotear) and the creation of art is quite interesting, considering drag is not typically considered an “art form” in the traditional sense. A relevant question related to Mexican drag as an art form, then, is the very label that we should use for it. Is drag a form of popular entertainment? Is it a performance genre? Does it belong more in a cabaret or an art museum? Throughout this analysis, I ask, what is at stake in referring to LMD, and Mexican drag more generally, as *art*, a category closely related to Mexican national cultural productions like cinema, muralism, and

³³ Hall, “Notes on Deconstructing ‘the Popular,’” 450.

painting? What kind of *distinction* does the category of “art” offer Mexican drag, especially in the face of other forms of (US and European) national drag. This has become even more important, perhaps, as the RPDR franchise, despite the success of LMD in Mexico and Latin America, has announced its incursion into the world of Mexican drag via a new branch of its show, *Drag Race Mexico*, for which a casting call was publicly announced on 8 August 2022 via *Twitter*.³⁴ While the release date for Season 1 of RPDR Mexico has yet to be announced, many questions remain, especially in relation to LMD. Which show will be more popular, given RPDR’s budget is much higher than the Mexican show? What language will the show appear in? Who will judge it and who will participate? How will Mexican queen’s participation in a US-funded show compete in the drag market against LMD’s feminosas?

The work of the *YouTube* reality show LMD draws on those aspects of Mexican culture which, today, have become inseparable from Mexico’s artistic-cultural image on a transnational scale: Indigenous—or Indigenist—elements like Quetzalcóatl, nopales, and the traditional clothing of Indigenous peoples, as well as artistic elements from the “Mexican School” and “neo-Mexicanist” movements of the 1920s/30s and 1980s/90s, respectively, like the bleeding sacred heart, Mesoamerican pyramids, and the inspiration of famous Mexican muralists and painters (i.e., Diego Rivera [1886–1967], David Alfaro Siqueiros [1896–1874], José Clemente Orozco [1883–1949], Frida Kahlo [1907–1954], María Izquierdo [1902–1955], among others). It attempts to insert itself into the drag movement that is rapidly becoming internationally mainstream, all the while it tries to maintain its references to Mexican art and pop culture; this, to a certain extent, creates ironic tensions as there is a continuous conflict between the global and

³⁴ WorldOfWonder, Twitter Post.

the regional in these performances of Mexican drag on transnational stages and entertainment circuits. LMD's double project, that of reappropriating Mexico's cultural-political history and the exaltation of Mexican queer pop cultures in the face of US queer pop cultures, results in a product of cultural entertainment which ties LGBTQ+ communities (specifically the drag sub-community) to the history and symbols of Mexican nationalism based in the Revolution of 1910.³⁵

To be sure, there is nothing “new” about drag in Mexico, or Latin America more generally. Across the region, and especially in Mexico, there have been underground and even televised instances of drag and *travesti* cultures for at least a hundred years.³⁶ Among the most notable in Mexican history is the infamous *Baile de los 41* (Dance of the 41); in 1901, under the dictatorial, thirty-one year rule of President Porfirio Díaz (1884–1911), the police raided a private ball in a Mexico City home, finding 41 queer folks, 19 of whom were in drag or *travestidos*, illegally congregating while performing “illicit” activities. The “criminals” were arrested and later sent to military camps in the Yucatán peninsula. This event caused an enormous press scandal in the city and the country as one of the first

³⁵ Examples of Mexican cultural history in LMD include: “La Más Alebrije” (Season 1, Ep. 4); “La Más Típica” (Season 2, Ep. 1); “La Más Religiosa” (Season 2, Ep. 2); “La Más Independiente” (Season 2, Ep. 6); “La Más Prehispánica” (Season 3, Ep. 2); “La Más Folclórica” (Season 4, Ep. 1); “La Más Pintada” (Season 4, Ep. 2); “La Más Revolucionaria” (Season 4, Ep. 3); “La Más Imperial” (Season 3, Ep. 10); “La Más Artesanal” (Season 5, Ep. 1); and “La Más Monja Coronada” (Season 5, Ep. 10). Examples of Mexican pop culture include: “La Más Diva” (Season 1, Ep. 1); “La Más Thalia” (Season 1, Ep. 3); “La Más Dramática” (Season 1, Ep. 5); “La Más Juanga” (Season 2, Ep. 5); “La Más Villana” (Season 2, Ep. 7); “La Más Famosa” (Season 3, Ep. 5); “La Más Buchona” (Season 3, Ep. 8); “La Más Chola” (Season 4, Ep. 8); “La Más Famosa (Season 5, Ep. 5); and “La Más del Toro” (Season 5, Ep. 6).

³⁶ Throughout this section, I use the term *travesti* (most readily translated in English to “transvestite”), much in the manner that the word “queer” is used today. As a radical reappropriation of a pejorative term, a localized political identity, and a critical stance in a critique of masculinity and the nation. Within Latin America, *travesti* is a commonly used term within literature, popular culture, and among queer communities that have reclaimed it. This confounds US and European-based understandings of trans* identities (notably the unequivocal acceptance of “transgender” as the only politically correct label), as “transvestite” and “transsexual” are held as anachronistic and derogatory in these contexts. For example, see Rizki, “Latin/x American Trans Studies,” 145–155.

publicly-acknowledged—even if condemned—queer communities in Mexico was brought to the attention of Mexicans across the nation. An article published in the *Diario del Hogar* shortly after the raid, commented:

Repugnante es el hecho que descubrió la policía el sábado en la noche en una casa de una de las calles de la Paz.

Celebrábase ahí un baile en el que se estaba produciendo más ruido del necesario en una diversión.

Acudió la policía y se encontró con que en el baile no había una sola mujer, pues la veintena que aparentemente estaba eran hombres vestidos con corpiños y enaguas y pintados con colorete y algunos hasta con aretes sobrepuestos.

Mujeres y hombres se encuentran en la cárcel.

Con el OLUGNA esté probado
La sífilis ha mermado.³⁷

The Dance of the 41 has been a key historical event in queer Mexican cultural productions throughout the twentieth century and to the present.³⁸ Most recently, the Mexican director David Pablos' critically-acclaimed homonymous film, *El baile de los 41* (2020), re-tells the historical event based on *chismes* (or gossip) that President Díaz's son-in-law was among the men dressed in drag in 1901.³⁹ This is one example of the ways in which contemporary queer Mexican

³⁷ "Información del día: Baile de señores solos," *Diario del Hogar*, 19 November 1901, Fondo Reservado del Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Biblioteca Nacional/Hemeroteca Nacional, Mexico City, Mexico, Digitized for Documents of Latin American and Latino Art, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. <https://icaa.mfah.org/s/es/item/778086#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1455%2C757%2C5459%2C3055> (emphasis original). .

³⁸ Twenty-first century discussion of the importance of the Dance of the 41 include: Monsiváis, "Los 41 y la gran redada," 22–28; McKee Irwin, *Mexican Masculinities*; and Domínguez-Ruvalcaba, *Modernity and the Nation in Mexican Representations of Masculinity*, among other examples.

³⁹ For rumors that members from Mexico City's elite were present at the dance see, "El baile nefando," *El País: Diario católico*, 22 November 1901, Fondo Reservado del Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Biblioteca Nacional/Hemeroteca Nacional, Mexico City, Mexico, Digitized for Documents of Latin American and Latino Art, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. <https://icaa.mfah.org/s>

cultural producers have attempted to renew and redress, on their own terms, foundational Mexican discourses at the intersection of the nation, sex, and sexuality.

Within popular culture, too, queer drag and travesti cultures have blossomed across the region. An initial incursion into Mexico City's queer archives revealed a largely unknown queer drag competition or beauty pageant held in the Hotel de México (now the World Trade Center México). Images from the gay Mexican photographer Armando Cristeto at the *Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo's Centro de Documentación Arkheia* highlight the crowning of *Señorita México Gay* (Miss Gay Mexico), as well as other images of gay and travesti attendees, as early as 1978.⁴⁰ While little information is readily accessible about this event, these photographs evidence the presence, congregation, and community-building practices of diverse queer collectives within Mexico City. Additionally, within the context of television and entertainment, there is the first (to my knowledge) Spanish-language drag reality competition in Latin America, *The Switch* (2015–2018). The show originally aired in Chile as *The Switch Drag Race: El Arte del Transformismo* (2015–2016), looking for the best Chilean drag queen in a series of lip-sync, fashion, dance, and talent competitions with the necessary twist of reality drama. The second season aired as *The Switch Drag Race: Desafío Mundial*

[/es/item/778126#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299](https://icaa.mfah.org/es/item/778126#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-1673%2C0%2C5895%2C3299). For an article that attempts to dispel such rumors, see “El baile escandaloso,” *El Imparcial: Diario de la mañana*, 23 November 1901, Fondo Reservado del Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, Biblioteca Nacional/Hemeroteca Nacional, Mexico City, Mexico, Digitized for Documents of Latin American and Latino Art, International Center for the Arts of the Americas, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. <https://icaa.mfah.org/es/item/778136#?c=&m=&s=&cv=&xywh=-2001%2C-14%2C6551%2C3666>.

⁴⁰ Concurso Señorita México Gay, Piso 37 del Hotel de México (hoy WTC), 1978 (printed 2017), box 6, item 393, Fondo Armando Cristeto, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Mexico City, Mexico. Also see Osorno, *Tengo que morir todas las noches*.

(2018) and was open to Spanish-speaking drag queens across the world.⁴¹ *La Más Draga* features a program structure extremely similar to *The Switch* yet, unlike RPDR, the Chilean show is never cited as an inspiration for LMD. Moreover, there have been other smaller *YouTube*-format reality drag competitions based in Latin America, including the Chile-based *Versus Drag Queens* (2017–2021, four seasons) and *Toma Mi Dinerita* (TMD, 2020–present, three seasons), which was born as an online Mexican drag competition during the COVID-19 pandemic. More recently, there was the poorly-reviewed part-drag, part-fashion Mexican reality competition *Iconic Drag Fashion Week* (2022). These kinds of programs reveal a lot about the thriving drag cultures in Latin America: (1) queer/drag cultures have existed historically throughout Latin America, and specifically in Mexico; (2) (Latin American) drag is gaining international popularity, as programs like LMD, RPDR, and LMD demonstrate; and (3) RPDR is not the only model for national drag, even if it is the most pervasive.

La Más Draga, then, is quite an interesting piece of popular entertainment insofar as its commercial success has popularized Mexican drag internationally, among both queer and cisgender/heterosexual Spanish-speaking audiences. It serves as a form of Latin American representation in the larger world of drag entertainment, and, by interacting with traditional elements of Mexican culture that are readily identifiable by everyday citizens, it seeks to foster tolerance in a country filled with homophobia and transphobia. Additionally, the different episodes often make poignant critiques of machismo where drags discuss issues like homophobia, discrimination, and AIDS stigma. It also often brings on representatives of queer

⁴¹ RPDR and *The Switch* have an interesting quality that links the both of them. The famous US-based drag queen Gia Gunn, an Asian-American trans* woman, was a participant in RPDR Season 6, *RuPaul's Drag Race: All Stars* Season 4, and *The Switch* Season 2.

non-profits or activists to talk to the drags and audiences about LGBTQ+ community health in Mexico; or other times, it brings on large corporations to—in an act of “rainbow capitalism” or *capitalismo rosa*—express the company’s “support” of LGBTQ+ issues.⁴² Notwithstanding, LMD is a form of queer representation that features a diverse LGBTQ+ cast. One commenter on *YouTube* applauds the diversity in LMD’s casting:

Honestamente algo que siempre le he aplaudido a *La Más Draga* y le seguiré aplaudiendo, es lo diversos de sus casts. Siempre hay de toodo: Reinas barbudas, drag kings, plus queens, realza trans, haute couture queens, drag alternativo, de terror, experimental, reinas con capacidades distintas, baby drags, senior drags, fem drag, drag no binario, bio queens, bio kings... ¡Me encanta! En prácticamente cualquier otro tipo de competencia drag únicamente se enfocan a un estilo concreto de drag, como en el universo *Drag Race* que es un enfoque casi exclusivo al fem drag y al pageant. O *Dragula* que es sobre drag de terror. Pero aquí abrazan toooodo lo que cubre el paraguas de la diversidad de género y la diversidad drag, ¡Y eso me encanta!⁴³

Despite this diversity and the tolerant attitudes it represents, I believe we need to be critical of all performances of queer Mexicanidad, especially those that, consciously or not, interact with nationalist discourses. This does not mean immediately decrying all forms of queer cultural production that interact with the idea of the nation through attempted subversions of hegemonic discourses; instead, it means trying to deal with the messiness of representing a community that

⁴² One notable example is when queer employees from the freelance-style ride service *Uber* Mexico were brought on to address instances of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination in Uber rides, as well as to humanize Uber drivers by saying that they, too, face discrimination from LGBTQ+ patrons. Ultimately, it worked as a marketing strategy for Uber and surely garnered a large amount of money for LMD. Alfonso González, Head of Diversity Strategies for Customer Service at Uber in Mexico, tells the drags: “Y se preguntarán, ¿qué hace uber aquí? Y tienen razón. Debemos comenzar por reconocer que hemos tenido situaciones desafortunadas con miembros de la comunidad [LGBTQ+]. Pero por eso hoy venimos a pedir su ayuda para generar conciencia y respeto en nuestra comunidad. Esto es, en Uber creemos que todas las personas tenemos el derecho a movernos y transitar libremente, con respeto y con orgullo. Y suena bonito ¿pero qué hacemos al respecto? [...] No tolerar la discriminación.” *La Más Draga*, “La Más Famosa.” (Season 5, Ep. 5). The queer, Mexican performance artist Lechedevirgen Trimegisto (Felipe Osornio), in one of his famous essays, discusses *adversidad sexual* (sexual adversity) and *capitalismo rosa* in Mexico: Osornio, “Al final del arcoíris.”

⁴³ *La Más Draga*, “La Más Folclórica.” (Season 4, Ep. 1)

has been traditionally marginalized from the national imaginary through the very language of the nation. We must interrogate the problematic, and contradictory, ways that LMD performs Mexicanidad on a transnational stage and in neoliberal, post-NAFTA Mexico.

II. Between Drag Television and National Cinema

It is the first episode of Season 1 of *La Más Draga*. Seven drags, all from Mexico City, come up from under the black curtains that hide them from each other and the camera. The queens all turn to scan the room for their competitors, letting out a scream of recognition, as most of them are friends and fellow work peers—this is where the competition begins! Right after this initial scene, Lorena Herrera, Mexican pop singer, actress, and host of LMD Season 1, explains the show and situates it within an “international drag network”:

Les quiero dar la bienvenida a este pequeño espacio creado para que tú descubras, aprecies, y aplaudas el maravilloso mundo del drag mexicano. Soñamos este show pensando en todos ustedes, pero especialmente en esta subcultura que, por mucho tiempo, ha permanecido escondida en nuestro país. Gracias a programas como [*RuPaul's Drag Race*] hemos aprendido a valorar a estos artistas que, por mucho tiempo, no fueron conocidos como tal [...] En México estamos llenos de riquezas, y, por supuesto, no puede faltar la *rrrica* jotería que a todos nos invade cada vez que nos sentimos reina, diva, y encantada hada de lugar.⁴⁴

What interests me most about Herrera’s discourse is that she posits Mexican drag culture as something that, until that very moment, had gone unknown in Mexico and globally (“por mucho tiempo, ha permanecido escondida en nuestro país”), but, with the help of international programs like RPDR, could be inserted into a newly-created drag consumer market. She also makes

⁴⁴ La Más Draga, “La Más Diva.” (Season 1, Ep. 1)

references to the “richness” of Mexican culture, trying to relate Mexican drag to other national art forms (“en México estamos llenos de riquezas”) like muralism, painting, and pop production.

After Herrera’s presentation, the camera takes us to the *Nyx* dressing room, where Johnny Carmona will give the first “¡holi, holi, holi!” and an explanation of the inaugural theme.⁴⁵ The show’s first theme is “La Más Diva,” an homage to the famous actresses of the *época de oro del cine mexicano* (Golden Age of Mexican cinema, roughly spanning the 1930s to 60s); among them are cited María Felix (1914–2002), Dolores del Río (1904–1983), Yolanda “Tongolele” Montes (b. 1932), Miroslava Stern (1925–1955), Evangelina Elizondo (1929–2017), María Victoria (b. 1933), Meche Barba (1922–2000), and Ninón Sevilla (1929–2015). It’s important to highlight the first episode’s theme, as this serves as the first form of self-presentation to the world about what constitutes Mexican drag. Carmona explains that the first episode will serve to highlight the role of women (actresses) during this iconic period of Mexican film. While the theme of the Golden Age gives a feminine twist to the representation of Mexican film productions, it paradoxically remembers—and thus, reactivates—one of the periods of Mexican cinema in which there existed the most rigid constructions of gender, class, and ethnicity/race, as well as the post-revolutionary nation-building project invested in the consolidation of machista/masculinist attitudes.

⁴⁵ *Nyx* is a cosmetics brand and major sponsor of the show. The ¡holi, holi, holi! is now-iconic phrase of Johnny Carmona, Mexican reality TV and Internet personality. In the first seasons of LMD, he served as the host that gave all the cultural explanations/mini-histories and was a permanent judge. Although, since Season 4, he has not been a judge and now only retains the ¡holi, holi, holi! section and explains the theme before leaving for the rest of the episode. His role, however, is of great importance because his explanations always situate the show within a line of Mexican cultural history. A paradigmatic example of his historical explanations is his re-telling of the Spanish Conquest in Episode 2: “En 1521, pues este territorio fue conquistado por España. Porque, pues, particularmente creo que la Conquista era cuestión de tiempo. O sea, el imperio azteca, toda Mesoamérica, y todos los pueblos prehispánicos eran un pastel listo para ser comido por Europa. O sea, estaríamos hablando o inglés, o francés, o portugués. Pero de que nos iba a pasar, nos iba a pasar. Esto era inevitable.” I’m always left asking, *Why was the colonization of Mesoamerica “inevitable”?* La Más Draga, “La Más Religiosa.” (Season 2, Ep. 2)

Carlos Monsiváis, perhaps one of the most prominent contemporary Mexican cultural critics, says of the Golden Age:

El cine preside las informaciones: así viven los mexicanos, así se visten según su posición social, así se oyen, así se expresan, así se mueven, así intercambian voces, gestos, respuestas violentas o quejumbrosas. El-Ser-Humano-Hecho-en-México se apega a lo propuesto en la pantalla, de la que extrae las decoraciones indispensables: éstas son las reacciones pertinentes en casos de maternidad dolorosa, adulterio, trato varonil, pobreza sobrellevada con honradez, desgracias asumidas como obediencia a la ley de Dios.⁴⁶

The cinema he describes was didactic in nature, one that codified proper forms of “acting Mexican” after the Revolution. He explains that the cinema of this period was largely focused on re-telling the history of the 1910 Revolution: “En su oportunidad, el cine sonoro adopta una versión costumbrista y fantasiosa del movimiento armado y se apresta, como lo hará el cine norteamericano anticipándose al italiano y el alemán, a reelaborar como objeto de consumo el impulso de la épica popular de México [...] En la década de los treinta, la intención es pedagógica: exhibamos lo que ha sido el movimiento de 1910 para fortalecer su vigencia.”⁴⁷ The Mexican film critic Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado defines the productions from the Golden Age of Mexican cinema as “national cinema” or the “cultural genre that acts around the idea of ‘national culture,’ as a repository of those signs that define the polity, and as a site of contestation for definitions of national sensibilities.”⁴⁸ Additionally, de la Mora’s theoretical framework, “Macho Nation?,” serves as a way to bring together the divergent elements of the Golden Age’s film productions, the rigidity of its gender roles, and the connection between masculinity and nationalism born out of the Revolution: “‘Macho nation?’ refers to the contested male-centered

⁴⁶ Monsiváis, *Historia mínima de la cultura mexicana en el siglo xx*, 308.

⁴⁷ Monsiváis, *Historia mínima de la cultura mexicana en el siglo xx*, 314–315.

⁴⁸ Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 4.

modern national project ushered in by the Mexican Revolution of 1910. The concept is a reference to the cult of a particular form of masculinity—and therefore also femininity and womanliness—that was aggressively promoted by the cultural nationalist post-revolutionary establishment.”⁴⁹ This framework accounts for how the Mexican Revolution of 1910 contributed to the creation of a “cult of a particular form of [virile] masculinity” in the nation-building project (*machismo*), specifically through cultural formations. Within the context of Mexican cinema’s Golden Age, and more specifically, within revolutionary cinema, we can begin to see some of the tensions that reside within LMD—notably, how to feminize a traditionally masculinist theme, and whether this feminization or queering of the Mexican film tradition has a revolutionary potential, or if it merely reproduces the same stereotypes of the period’s national cinema.

As I have previously mentioned, audiovisual media like film have functioned as didactic artifacts in defining the characteristics of Mexicanidad, its proper performance, and the attitudes it should take on in the face of foreign powers. The Golden Age of Mexican cinema heavily drew on the Mexican Revolution for its ideological content, and it created a form of mass entertainment modeled after the Revolution’s restrictive gender, ethnic, racial, and class roles, as well as appropriate forms of religious, romantic, and sexual conduct. Monsiváis argues that Mexican cinema in the Golden Age served a “regulatory” function; it was a pedagogical tool, a hidden form of education, that exemplified proper—as well as unacceptable—forms of (social) citizenship: “El cine es una entidad nueva que enseña la ubicación de la familia, de la pareja y de las personas. Si la tradición ha sido todo aquello que combate las sensaciones de extrañeza, el

⁴⁹ de la Mora, “Introduction,” 2.

cine introduce el esquema pedagógico en el que la extrañeza se disuelve ante la repetición que inaugura otro “ser nacional.”⁵⁰ Specifically in relation to sex and gender roles, de la Mora adds: “Cinema was instrumental in the invention of the Mexican macho: virile, brave, proud, sexually potent, and physically aggressive. Masculinity is rendered into a visual spectacle on the battlegrounds of the Mexican Revolution, becoming the focus of the camera lens and receiving unprecedented international cinematic and photographic coverage.”⁵¹ In conjunction with literature, the visual arts, and folklore, cinema during this period was preoccupied with the consolidation of the nation and the establishment of official forms of virile Mexicanidad.

Nevertheless, by the 1950s, according to Monsiváis, Mexican cinema lost its Golden Age Essence; the films created after this period were largely low-quality and low-budget, which resulted in the autochthonously Mexican film genre *las películas de churro*. Later, Mexican cinema’s renaissance, or *el nuevo cine mexicano*, coincided with rapid privatization of the film industry in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the administration of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994). Until this point, the Mexican State had been among the most avid promoters of culture, especially national cinema. Salinas de Gortari, however, significantly reduced state funds for cultural productions, forcing cinematographers to search for private and international funds.⁵² This search for funds outside of Mexico caused a shift in the subjects cinema covered and the audiences it sought to enthrall. Most significantly, issues related to the urban middle-class and international audiences displaced the until-then iconic centrality of the *campesino* and rural Mexico in major films.

⁵⁰ Monsiváis, *Historia mínima de la cultura mexicana en el siglo xx*, 313.

⁵¹ de la Mora, “Introduction,” 7.

⁵² Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 3.

Sánchez Prado argues that this shift in themes and audiences was a necessary step for cultural productions in the neoliberalization process: “The first step toward the commercial rebirth of Mexican cinema was freeing its production from the nationalist imperatives that had defined the industry since its inception in the post-revolutionary period, in order to reflect the experiences of new social groups that were emerging along with the process of cultural remodernization brought about by the the neoliberal economic and political model.”⁵³ Sánchez Prado defines this shift in Mexican cinema as “neo-Mexicanist,” which is a “particular form of Mexican cinema in the age of NAFTA, engaged in the recovery or reconstruction of national identity and/or the cultural symbols and practices that constitute that identity.”⁵⁴ Neo-Mexicanist cinema was a cinema in crisis; the crisis of how to be Mexican (regional) and, at same time, how to attract foreign audiences and international funds under NAFTA’s open market (global). De la Mora agrees with this characterization of neo-Mexicanist cinema as a response to economic, political, and social crises brought about by NAFTA: “It is important to also note that the Mexican State today continues the earlier post-revolutionary tradition of investing in film production and promotion [...] Mexican national identity was significantly refashioned in light of NAFTA in order to shift the nation’s public alliances closer to U.S. and global economic interests.”⁵⁵ Film, and other cultural productions of this time period, needed to create an exportable image of Mexico to teach the world what it means to be Mexican; here lies the tension between the national/transnational, regional/global, open/closed, traditional/innovative, and rural/urban. And still, while the films in this period try to break away from the nationalist

⁵³ Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 5.

⁵⁴ Sánchez Prado, *Screening Neoliberalism*, 11.

⁵⁵ de la Mora, “Introduction,” 9.

model in order to compete in a neoliberal market, they fail at completely rupturing from these symbolically potent schemas of Mexicanidad.

And while this may seem like a drawn-out, and unnecessary, explanation about the historical development of Mexican film for a chapter on LMD, it is important to understand this context in order to unravel the messy ties that LMD bears for international audiences. LMD's success, then, is also linked to a messy relationship between transnational and national themes relevant to other neo-Mexicanist audiovisual productions. The film critics Hester Baer and Ryan Long explain of the canonical neo-Mexicanist film with homosexual themes, Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también* (2001): "While the film's success results in part from its participation in the tropes of global cinema, it constantly intervenes in these tropes with discourses that insist on the specificity of Mexican national-historical memory in its temporal and spatial dimensions."⁵⁶ And this seems to also be the case with LMD, which seeks global success while anchoring itself in "Mexican nation-historical memory and its temporal and spatial dimensions." Thus, beneath the surface of a seemingly innocuous theme like "La Más Diva" lie accumulations of masculinist discourses that cannot easily be freed by a surface-level queer performance of Mexican history.

III. *La Más Draga* and the Neo-Mexicanist Critique

Historically, one of the roles of culture in Mexico, and Latin American more generally, has been to foment a sense of national unity in the face of foreign or oppressive powers. This is especially notable in the Independence Wars against Spanish colonialism—in Mexico this occurred from 1810 to 1827—when there was a need to create an "us" (Mexicans) against the

⁵⁶ Baer and Long, "Transnational Cinema and the Mexican State in Alfonso Cuarón's *Y tu mamá también*," 151.

“others” (Spanish colonizers). Within Mexico, culture has been a key mediator in the violent wars surrounding Independence and the Revolution. Cuellar, writing of baile folclórico and the performance of Mexicanidad, notes that “Mexican regional and traditional dance—known today as folklórico dance—and its attendant aesthetic practices have been central to the creation of Mexicanidad (which names the complex interplay between nation and identity), offering a window into the conflicts, frictions, and failures of this contested formulation.”⁵⁷ We cannot take for granted how, even as bodies in motion enact codified forms of Mexican nationalism, they find ways at creatively “failing” in their performances, gesturing towards “something different,” other ways of “being Mexican.” For Cuellar performance has been central to the historical construction of Mexicanidad because, in the folkloric dances he explores, moving bodies configure and act out the gendered, nationalist discourses that permeate the Mexican context. These performances of Mexicanidad are tied to ideas of cultural authenticity and are central to the nation-building project. They are particularly imbued by the notion of folklore as a kind of national patrimony. Secco writes of folklore and nationalism: “The notion of folklore in Latin America has been bound to the formation of national identity, and has been ‘used by the state [...] in order to bring about national unity.’ Folklore is thus seen as ‘a kind of bank where authenticity is safely stored.’ In this sense, as a manifestation of national culture, folklore represents also the place where collective memory is stored.”⁵⁸ And folklore is intimately tied to ideas around

⁵⁷ Cuellar, *Choreographic Mexico*, 5. Additionally, the art historian Secco notes how the image of la Virgen de Guadalupe (Our Lady of Guadalupe) was used to create unity during times of war: “The original holy image of the Virgin, dating from her apparition to the indigenous boy Juan Diego in 1531, is Mexico's most important religious icon [...] It has been used as an emblem in critical periods of political and social change in Mexican history, becoming the central image of the banner carried by the priest Hidalgo in 1810, which sparked the war for Mexican independence.” Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 37.

⁵⁸ Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 12.

“tradition,” which is a fluid and fraught concept that forms, in the opinion of Hall, a cultural battleground in the monopolization of authenticity:

Tradition is a vital element in culture; but it has little to do with the mere persistence of old forms. It has much more to do with the way elements have been linked together or articulated. These arrangements in a national-popular culture have no fixed or inscribed position, and certainly no meaning which is carried along, so to speak, in the stream of historical tradition, unchanged. Not only can the elements of “tradition” be rearranged, so that they articulate with different practices and positions, and take on a new meaning and relevance. It is also often the case that cultural struggle arises in its sharpest form just at the point where different, opposed traditions meet, intersect. They seek to detach a cultural form from its implantation in one tradition, and to give it a new cultural resonance or accent.

This is precisely the battleground on which LMD stands, the re-negotiation of culture in a struggle between “old” and “new” forms. What it attempts to do is take traditional elements of Mexican folklore and re-signify them through queer performances of Mexican “traditions.” But, as Hall notes, this maneuver is extremely complicated. What does it mean to include within Mexicanidad communities which have been marginalized from the national imaginary? How do we sort through this “point where different, opposed traditions meet, intersect”?

Performance, folklore, and folkloric dance, then, are all central to LMD and its performance of queer Mexicanidad. In order to successfully or authentically perform its Mexicanidad, the show draws upon foundational myths of the nation, Mexican folklore (especially that of its Indigenous peoples), and Mexico’s political-cultural history. Mexican folklore and the Indigenous traditions of Mexico have been represented in all of the seasons, across its different themes: examples include, “La Más Alebrije” (Season 1, Ep. 4); “La Más Típica” (Season 2, Ep. 1); “La Más Prehispánica” (Season 3, Ep. 2); “La Más Folclórica”

(Season 5, Ep. 1); and “La Más Artesanal” (Season 5, Ep. 1). As both Cuellar and Secco have noted, the Mexican state has taken elements of Indigenous cultures and turned them into the folklore/myths necessary for the nation-building project—including its virile nationalism. In his description of the “*mestizo* state,” Cuellar argues that “although Mexico’s Indigenous peoples and cultures became the bearers of cultural authenticity and uniqueness, they needed to be modernized and racialized as mestizo; that is, the state had to integrate their difference into the idea of a homogenized but mestizo nation.”⁵⁹ So, in the problematic construction of a national identity, the real lives of Indigenous people have been discarded in favor of idyllic images of a mestizo (hybridized) people.

With this in mind, the first episode of Season 4, “La Más Folclórica,” is one key example of how LMD participates in processes of cultural protectionism and the appropriation of Indigenous cultures. The challenge in this episode is to take elements of Mexican folkloric wardrobe and dance, combining them with each participant’s drag personality, and creating a performance presentation of their chosen folkloric dance on the runway. A neon pink, blue, and yellow image of Mexico opens this episode; except this map of the Mexican nation is different because it wears a glowing pair of pink stilettos, seemingly queering the nation or dressing the map in drag. After the “¡holi, holi, holi!” Johnny Carmona gives a mini-explanation of the theme: “Inspirados en estos casi dos millones de kilómetros cuadrados que es México y en sus bailes—los bailes que celebran, que respetan, que visibilizan, que representan. Los bailes son alegría.”⁶⁰ Carmona’s presentation transmits the message that folklore is the patrimony and property of Mexicans—including the Mexican drags—creating a sense of unity across the shared

⁵⁹ Cuellar, *Choreographing Mexico*, 9.

⁶⁰ La Más Draga, “La Más Folclórica.” (Season 4, Ep. 1)

legacy of dance. It is no small detail that a theme for an opening episode of a new season is related to folkloric dance, those performances “that celebrate, visibilize, [and] represent” Mexicanidad. Cuellar describes the importance of dance in the nation-building project as follows: “The Mexican regional and traditional dance that would come to be known as folklórico became a significant embodied means of grappling with Mexico’s past, its ethnoracial diversity, and its heteronormative imperatives; of negotiating the incorporation of ‘living’ Indigenous cultures of the present; and of attending to the gender and sexual performances of Mexican nationalism.”⁶¹ If folkloric dances are those means “of attending to the gender and sexual performances of Mexican nationalism,” then LMD takes full advantage of this to stage its performance of queer Mexicanidad through the use of national dance cultures.

The problem with LMD’s venture into queer folklore, however radical its intent, is its representation and appropriation of the “‘living’ Indigenous cultures of the present” that Cuellar identifies. Among the folkloric dances featured in this episode are: *El baile de los chinelos* (Morelos); *La danza del jaguar* (Guerrero); *La danza de los viejitos* (Michoacán); *Los viejitos de corpus* (Estado de México); *El baile de la iguana* (Guerrero); *El baile de Mexicapán* (Zacatecas); *El calabaceado* (Baja California); *El jarabe tapatío* (Jalisco); *El baile de los voladores de Papantla* (Veracruz); *Los parachicos* (Chiapas); *La danza folclórica de Jalisco* (Jalisco); y *La danza del venado* (Sonora and Sinaloa). Many of these dances have their roots in, or are still very much part of the living heritage of, the Indigenous traditions of Mexico. And we know that in times of national crisis, the Mexican state (and its attendant cultural productions) have drawn upon elements of Indigenous cultures—not to be confused with living Indigenous people (i.e.

⁶¹ Cuellar, *Choreographing Mexico*, 22.

Indigenous art vs. Indigenist art)—to foment feelings of nationalism in the face of foreign powers.⁶² The result has been a rampant appropriation of Indigeneity for the purposes of nationalist art, cinema, and literature. Secco explains that in the post-revolutionary period, “faced with the task of clearly defining ‘lo mexicano,’ what ‘Mexican’ means, it was necessary above all to assert independence from any aesthetic foreign influence; the representation of an image of mexicanidad was found in the indigenous heritage, which became the foundation of that which was ‘truly Mexican.’”⁶³ This kind of foundational mythology, based in a false, appropriated, or essentialized Indigeneity, is problematic in its exploitative use of Indigenous cultures and their continued exclusion from the nation. LMD, in this episode and ones like it, takes elements of this supposed “folklore” (Indigenous cultures) and “queers” (*jotear*) them in an ostensibly radical act; but, regardless of its attempt at a queer subversion, I believe it falls into the trap of cultural appropriation and exploitation.

One non-binary drag from this season, Paper Cut, represented *El baile de los voladores de Papantla*, a dance from the state of Veracruz’s Tutunakú people. In this traditional dance, several dancers climb to the top of a high-standing pole, from which several of them launch themselves, tied to the pole, swinging around and dancing upside-down in mid-air; another performer plays a flute, standing atop the pole. It is an astonishing dance to witness and requires years of training. While within the show’s narrative, Paper Cut received immense praise for their outfit, makeup, and “perfect runway,” other audiences were apt to note the problems of cultural appropriation always already present in the concept of “Mexican folklore.” In a *Twitter* interview by @AJplusespanol (September 2021), Aldahir Jiménez, social media influencer, influencer and

⁶² For a discussion of Indigenist or nativist art, see Barnitz and Frank, “Social, Ideological, and Nativist Art.”

⁶³ Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 4–5.

member of the Tutunakú people, commented on Paper Cut’s controversial outfit: “Exotiza la ropa que para nosotros y nosotras es importante. Para que una persona pueda ser volador o voladora necesita una preparación de años. [El problema es] que al final lo que hace es relegarnos, despolitizar a las poblaciones que sí formamos parte de ellas.”⁶⁴ Another commenter on *Twitter*, @soydelfuego, criticizes the idea of folklore in relation to LMD: “El folklore es racista, [vestirse] de ‘indio’ para un performance es racista, pues sigue anulando a las personas que sí utilizan una indumentaria como sujetos políticxs, y lo reducen a lo colorido y performático. ¡El folklore también es una expresión de RACISMO!”⁶⁵ Still another fan, @semillitxs, discusses the relationship between folklore and *mestizaje* as a reductionist discourse: “En [LMD] tratan de irse por lo ‘mexicano’ pero ese nacionalismo sólo perpetúa la apropiación cultural de comunidades indígenas. Este show repite el discurso de ‘todxs somos mestizxs.’ Hueva.”⁶⁶ Despite the criticisms from various social media platforms, the audience reception for this episode was quite positive considering that it received over two million views and more than fifty-eight thousand likes.⁶⁷ Additionally, Paper Cut was so much of a fan favorite that the uproar from their elimination in Season 4 prompted the producers to re-cast them in Season 5, which had never been done before. Aside from the marketing techniques and the “dramatic” aspect autochthonous to reality TV models, Paper Cut’s return to the show signals the ways in which their behavior was seen as appropriate and legitimated by the producers’ authority/sponsors’ capital.

⁶⁴ AJPlus+Español, Twitter Post.

⁶⁵ AJPlus+Español, Twitter Post.

⁶⁶ AJPlus+Español, Twitter Post.

⁶⁷ This data was taken as of 13 March 2023. On 9 December 2021, the views were slightly over one million and the likes were slightly above fifty-one thousand, which demonstrates how the show, even overtime, accrues significant positive audience interaction.

Other elements like the scenography, title sequence, and end credits are more examples of how LMD, similar to other forms of cultural production imbricated in the promotion of a national identity, uses (and abuses) folkloric symbols and Indigenous elements of Mexican culture. I previously mentioned the title sequence's use of the maguey plant, pyramids and evil eyes, Indigenous patterns, and Aztec/Mexica symbols, but the end credits also flaunt similar images like the pyramid of Chichen Itzá in Yucatán or the Aztec calendar. Moreover, the scenography is filled with Mexican cactus in the form of the feathered serpent god Quetzalcóatl, neon maguey plants, and bleeding sacred hearts. Secco's description of the crucial elements featured within neo-Mexicanism could easily be applied to LMD's scenography and graphic art production: "The most recognizable characteristic of their big-format, figurative paintings is the inclusion of multiple symbols of *mexicanidad* or mexicanness, suggestive of the 'Mexican School' of the 1920s and 30s and their visual construction of national identity. Virgins of Guadalupe, Mexican flags, folkloric dresses, bleeding hearts, pre-hispanic figures, exotic fruits and objects of popular culture fill their compositions, often evoking the self-referential work of Frida Kahlo."⁶⁸

These kinds of representations work to promote a very particular—and now stereotypical—image of Mexico, largely based within the symbols of the post-revolutionary "Mexican school" of muralism and painting, as well as the neo-Mexicanist movement. This is particularly concerning in LMD, as it commodifies queer Mexicanidad in post-NAFTA Mexico. This trend is the direct legacy of neo-Mexicanism, which Secco explains, "played a significant role in the ushering of NAFTA, promoting through a series of exhibitions and cultural events a

⁶⁸ Secco, "Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA," 17.

certain image of the country for North American audience, while underscoring Mexico's cultural uniqueness through the spectacle of nationalism and the brandishing of symbols of national identity.”⁶⁹ Art historian Amy Sara Carroll also confirms the role of culture in negotiations of NAFTA and neoliberalism: “[*Mexico: Splendors of Thirty Centuries*] demonstrates that we must dispense with the notion that culture played no part in NAFTA’s brokerage or implementation [...] Neither the US culture wars, which globally spread like a virus or Hollywood cinema, nor the Mexican *telenovela*-inflected ‘neoliberal style,’ can be separated from the particularities of the integration of the US and Mexican economies.”⁷⁰ Nonetheless, there is not a fixed consensus on the role that neo-Mexicanism played in the advancement or negotiation of neoliberal policy—this may also be the case for LMD in the twenty-first century. Art historian Teresa Eckmann, contrary to Secco, defines neo-Mexicanism as “a style, a current, and a tendency—albeit diverse—within Mexican figurative painting that incorporates, recycles, or reinterprets iconographic content specifically referential to Mexican culture for the purpose of questioning fixed points of view and illuminating aspects of a syncretic, contemporary reality.”⁷¹ For her, neo-Mexicanism was not an uncritical appropriation of the symbols of the nation; instead, it was a critical reflection on the fractured nature of contemporary Mexican society or the Mexicanidad in crisis. Secco would, to a certain extent, agree with this analysis, as she states: “Although the style of Neo- Mexicanists was by no means a copy of past models, rather a contemporary proposal that appropriated symbols of national identity in an original manner, their visual language provoked a critical return to previously established formulas that regarded the

⁶⁹ Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 49.

⁷⁰ Carroll, “Remix || re: Mex || REMEX,” 25.

⁷¹ Eckmann, “Introduction,” 8.

use of art as a promoter of national culture.”⁷² While the specific intentions of neo-Mexicanist art forms are not the focus of this chapter, and while I do agree with Eckmann’s argument that there was critical reflection within neo-Mexicanism, I believe that Secco’s remarks about neo-Mexicanism are more apt for understanding the continued legacy of the movement within *La Más Draga*. The show, like neo-Mexicanists, “[is] by no means a copy of past models” of Mexicanidad, insofar as it represents a queering of the nation. But LMD can also be considered a return to “the use of art as a promoter of national culture”; in this case, it is a queer version of the national culture that is, nonetheless, being sold as a commodity on a transnational stage.

Conclusion. Mexican Drag Nationalism and Resistance

In conjunction with the use of folkloric themes—a process which has been historically used by the state to foment national unity—and the production’s Indigenist aesthetics, LMD employs different elements of Mexico’s political-cultural history as a repository from which to draw; in other words, it participates in a tradition of using culture, namely cultural productions, to insert itself into dominant discourses about the performance of Mexicanidad. LMD’s approach, the insertion of Mexican LGBTQ+/drag cultures into the history of the nation, has many contradictory implications. On the one hand, it offers a radical potential that, to a certain extent, *queers*—or at least includes queer subjects—into traditionally masculinist, misogynist, and transphobic traditions. In Cuellar’s words, queer performances of Mexicanidad offer ways of being that escape hegemonic understandings of subjectivity: “Festive instances [or queer performances] are an opportunity not only to symbolically negotiate tensions between the

⁷² Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 80.

quotidian and the possibility of imagining ourselves otherwise but also to feel and experience the world differently, to embody an ‘elsewhere’ within our own reality, and to expand and reeducate our senses.”⁷³ This sounds quite similar to the queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz’s conception of a “queer futurity”:

We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. The future is queerness’s domain. Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present. The here and now is a prison house. We must strive, in the face of the here and now’s totalizing rendering of reality, to think and feel a *then and there* [...] Queerness is also a performative because it is not simply a being but a doing for and toward the future.⁷⁴

For Muñoz, queerness is a radical potentiality, a futurity, and a mode of thinking that allows us to escape the “prison house” of the present in order “to think and feel a *then and there*”; in order to imagine other ways of being, livable futures. And while these understandings of queerness are utopian and note the ways in which queerness subverts hegemony, the context that LMD tries to imagine otherwise is so potent, so all-encompassing, that it is hard to appropriate machismo without reproducing some of its problematic aspects. So, while LMD queers machismo, it risks falling into the same stereotypical traps of the foundational myths, which we know are macho-centric, as de la Mora explains: “Machismo is intimately linked to State power and to the highly contested gendered social contract extended to Mexican citizens in the post-revolutionary period. Indeed, the machismo attributed to Mexican men [...] is among Mexico’s most internationally recognized symbols.”⁷⁵

⁷³ Cuellar, *Choreographing Mexico*, 7.

⁷⁴ Muñoz, “Introduction,” 1.

⁷⁵ de la Mora, “Introduction,” 6.

One particularly interesting case study in LMD's re-telling of Mexican history is the third episode of Season 4, "La Más Revolucionaria," which attempts to feminize the 1910 Mexican Revolution. Just like in every other episode, the title sequence opens the show, followed by Johnny Carmona's "¡holi, holi, holi!" Carmona explains to the drags that they will take a time-traveling journey to the period from 1910 to 1920, which, he argues, is "el movimiento social más importante del siglo xx."⁷⁶ He discusses Porfirio Díaz's more-than-thirty-year presidency and names President Francisco I. Madero (1911–1913) the national hero who "[consiguió] lo que tenemos hoy: elecciones libres y democráticas"—to which several of the drags respond with a sarcastic look and gesture, begging the question, *how free and democratic are our elections?*⁷⁷ Several images flash on the screen at this point: five *soldaderas* (soldier women) wearing skirts and holsters; four *soldados* with guns, sitting at the head of *Máquina 739*, a massive coal-powered train part of the *ferrocarriles nacionales* during the Revolution; President Porfirio Díaz with First Lady Carmen Romero Rubio (1864–1944); María Félix in the revolutionary film *Enamorada* (1946); and a lithograph of a *soldado* skull, *Calavera Oaxaqueña* (1910), by the famous artist of the period José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913). While these images and the version of history they offer—as didactic elements for the audience—are fairly traditional, it's important to highlight the re-telling or twist that the episode highlights women revolutionaries on the runway. Although the Mexican Revolution was a highly masculinist endeavor, with its history and relevant mythology serving as foundations for the conception of

⁷⁶ He also states, "la Revolución mexicana por fin llegó a *La Más Draga*." *La Más Draga*, "La Más Revolucionaria." (Season 4, Ep. 3)

⁷⁷ Interestingly enough, there is no mention that, against the demands of the *campesino* revolutionaries (best exemplified by the masculinist national heroes Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata), Madero was hesitant to institute any revolutionary land reform projects. Instead, what is bolstered is his contribution to supposedly "free and democratic elections" (read: modernity), as the most significant gain of the Mexican Revolution.

the nation-*cum*-virile man; its re-interpretation via the queer performance of revolutionary femininities speaks to the ways in which, despite official discourses, individual participants can make critical interventions into the history of the Revolution via their outfits and political discourses, effectively complicating any facile reading of the program as a promoter of a masculinist nationalism. If we understand Mexican masculinist nationalism as a “regulatory law,” in the words of Butler, then we can think of the drags’ radical proposals as “possibilities for rematerialization” of the very concept of Mexicanidad: “Indeed, it is the instabilities, the possibilities for rematerialization, opened up by this process that mark one domain in which the force of the regulatory law can be turned against itself to spawn rearticulations that call into question the hegemonic force of that very regulatory law.”⁷⁸ Additionally, Cuellar points to the messiness, and sheer ambivalence, of performing Mexicanidad, reminding us that moving bodies, acting agents, constantly engage in an always already slippery dialectic between complicity and resistance: “By gesturing toward the possibilities of adopting a model that accounts for more than just resistance to the hegemonic construction of Mexican nationalism, I draw attention to the ways bodily practices enable modes of belonging that are at times complicit and/or resistant but that always cite a differentiated mode of *lo mexicano*.”⁷⁹

How, then, do we understand the complicated work of LMD as a cultural production embedded in meanings that are deeply steeped in the symbols of masculinity, nationhood, and sex? How do we engage with the individual participants’ performances that dance the fine line between complicity and resistance? One such example is Chilean participant C-Pher’s (Felipe Ignacio Rivera Rivera) representation of Dolores Jiménez y Muro (1850–1925), according to

⁷⁸ Butler, “Introduction,” xii.

⁷⁹ Cuellar, *Choreographing Mexico*, 27.

C-Pher, “feminista, activista, periodista, que luchó, a su manera, por los derechos de las mujeres en la Revolución mexicana.”⁸⁰ Before addressing the importance of this Mexican feminist’s representation, I would like to make an aside related to the participant. C-Pher is LMD’s first international participant; in Season 1, the producers solicited participants from Mexico City, but by Season 2, the show had become national, looking for drags from across Mexico. C-Pher’s participation in Season 4 marked the opening of LMD to international drags with a keen interest in Mexican culture. This was confirmed by the Season 5 audition call video, which, in all of its nationalist glory, opens with a military drumline song before explaining that the only requirements to participate are: “ser mayor de edad y hablar español.”⁸¹ With this call to Spanish-speakers generally, it seems as though LMD’s producers were trying to open up Mexican drag to a larger market, attracting international talent, which yielded participants in Season 5 from Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, and United States, in addition to drags from different Mexican states. Interestingly, then, LMD creates a context, a possibility for a queer drag queen from Chile to creatively intervene into crucial aspects of (revolutionary) Mexican history. In C-Pher’s runway representation of Jiménez y Muro, she carries a political poster reading: ““¡MUJERES! SUS DERECHOS Y OBLIGACIONES VAN MÁS ALLÁ DEL HOGAR.”⁸² Since Season 4, drags have been given the option to use a microphone during their runway, whether to give a speech, sing, or perform a lip-sync. In this episode, C-Pher takes the mic and, at center stage, exclaims: “Cuando hablamos de revolución, muchas veces pensamos en sangre, guerrillas, armas, y ¿ustedes creen eso solamente es revolución? Yo creo que no. La revolución

⁸⁰ La Más Draga, “La Más Revolucionaria.” (Season 4, Ep. 3)

⁸¹ La Más Draga, “Audiciones LMD5.” (Season 5)

⁸² La Más Draga, “La Más Revolucionaria.” (Season 4, Ep. 3)

es cambio. Y ese cambio lo hacemos todxs ustedes. Nuestra comunidad LGBTQ+ es revolución. Este programa, *La Más Draga*, es revolución.”⁸³ Her short speech attempts to critique the idea of revolution and boldly states that LMD, itself, is a representative of real revolution, instead of the “sangre, guerrillas, [and] armas” at the forefront of the Mexican Revolution.

While performances like C-Pher’s attempt to critique Mexican history (and nationalism) through feminized and queer re-interpretations, ultimately they fail to make critiques of larger articulations of power in which LMD and cultural productions like it are embedded. Because the reality is that LMD is deeply rooted in notions of Mexicanidad, and its very purpose is to serve as a commodity that promotes Mexican drag globally. Its producers are aware that the program and Mexican drag generally are becoming familiarized with audiences outside of Mexico—in Latin America, the US, and other areas—and, as such, it (re-)presents both Mexico and the queer Mexican community as products for export. LMD, it turns out, is a show that must deal with the crisis of Mexicanidad, of a national identity torn apart by exploitative economic conditions and the legacy of virile masculinity. In this way, the show is closely related to other neo-Mexicanist productions of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Eckmann, for example, discusses neo-Mexicanist figurative painting in post-NAFTA Mexico as follows: “In a 2001 interview, Teresa del Conde aptly referred to Mexican figurative painters of the 1980s as *Los catastrofistas* (The Catastrophists), thereby affirming that neo-Mexicanism work reflects an era of instability, crisis, and even, potentially, a neurosis of identity.”⁸⁴ Eckmann understands neo-Mexicanist art of the 1980s to be an art in and of crisis. In an “era of instability,” these divergent art forms have had to navigate through layers of accumulated discourses about

⁸³ *La Más Draga*, “La Más Revolucionaria.” (Season 4, Ep. 3)

⁸⁴ Eckmann, “Introducion,” 2–3.

Mexicanidad. In the twenty-first century, LMD is doing similar work around queer Mexican communities, all through the auspices of the neoliberal market.

What I have hoped to highlight in “¿Gays, maricas o algo más?” is the constant tension in LMD around Mexicanidad and foreignness, closely modeling the development of 1930s post-revolutionary film and neo-Mexicanist cultural productions in the 1980s and 1990s. At the center of LMD’s project is a conflict that has haunted Mexican cultural productions in times of crisis: how to sell Mexicanidad in an open market dominated by North American and European contenders. LMD’s response to RPDR’s global (and parasitic) success has been to insert itself into the international drag market with a Mexican regional specificity that borders on (queer) post-revolutionary nationalism. The result of taking popular elements of Mexican culture—like the “folklore” of Indigenous cultures or the nation’s political-cultural history—in LMD is quite similar to what Ferrante describes about RPDR in the US context: “This paradigm of homonormative representation ties the televisual popularity of RPDR to the US international and domestic political agenda. Today, drag queens are on the visible side of the strip: they come out as gay, giving up counterhegemonic and underground traditions, with the explicit intention of staying inside the borders of normative power, of gaining a place in contemporary, mainstream popular culture.”⁸⁵ And this is not dissimilar to what Puar describes of the legalization of same-sex marriage in the US as a plea for the full rights of a “full citizenship”: “Gay marriage, for example, is not simply a demand for equality with heterosexual norms, but more importantly a demand for reinstatement of white privileges and rights—rights of property and inheritance in particular.”⁸⁶ While LMD lauds itself as a revolutionary program that promotes the until-then

⁸⁵ Ferrante, “Super Troopers,” 163.

⁸⁶ Puar, “Introduction,” 29.

unknown world of Mexican drag, it also perpetuates a homonationalist discourse around the inclusion of the LBGTQ+ community within the state project, risking the loss of its radical impetus in order to fit within the borders of nationalism.

While *La Más Draga* is quite exceptional in its inclusion of marginalized communities into the nation—notably, women, LBGTQ+/queer folks, people with disabilities, and non-hegemonic bodies—I hope to have demonstrated how LMD is participating in a legacy of Mexican cultural productions that continuously work in conjunction with the state’s nationalist ideology. The mere act of queering Mexico does not absolve LMD of the problematic aspects it seeks to appropriate, as the show forms part of the Mexico-US conflict and the anxiety of being penetrated by foreign markets, powers, and ideologies in a post-NAFTA era. In other words, and despite the show’s queerness, LMD is another manifestation culture-*cum*-promoter of nationalism, a trend entrenched in the post-revolutionary period: “The role of Neo-Mexicanists in the government’s cultural campaign towards the ushering of NAFTA, could be explained by the continuity of an official cultural nationalism that was dragged from the years following the Revolution, tending to incorporate contemporary artists into a pre-established political and social structure.”⁸⁷ The context within which the show navigates is post-NAFTA Mexico, a country already open to international markets, trying to deal with both Mexicanidad in crisis and the influence of US and European cultural productions like RPDR and the *Drag Race* universe. LMD, then, continues the projects first enacted in the neo-Mexicanist art and cinema at the end of the twentieth and beginning of twenty-first centuries.

⁸⁷ Secco, “Neo-Mexicanism and NAFTA,” 81.

“*¿Gays, maricas o algo más?*” has been the first critical academic study about the Mexican reality drag competition *La Más Draga*. My analysis has focused on the content, context, and reception of the show to understand how it participates in a tradition of Mexican cultural productions working alongside the state’s nationalist project. I’ve attempted to situate LMD within the context of a post-NAFTA Mexico, dealing with the crisis of national identity in the face of US and European drag’s domination of the market. While US (and other) critics have given ample academic attention to RPDR, LMD has largely been ignored by both Mexican and foreign critics, despite the show’s rich archive of queer Mexicanidad. With the exponential growth in popularity in each season, it will be necessary to analyze the changing attitudes around Mexican drag, especially when understood as an extension of neo-Mexicanist cultural productions in art, cinema, literature, and television.

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