"En un clavo están colgadas." History, parody, and identity formation in the Mexican American *carpa*

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In dealing with the relationship between verbal art and ethnic identity, many of today's panelists have found themselves forced to consider the complex ways in which ethnicity interacts with other discourses of identity. My own analysis of a song parody from the repertoire of Rodolfo García, a Mexican American tent show comedian from San Antonio, Texas, will further underscore this point. Drawing on Charles Briggs' and Richard Bauman's recent theory of genre (1992), I seek to highlight the manipulation of generic conventions within Mr. García's parody. I argue that this intertextual play highlights the class-, and gender-based contradictions that were inherent in ongoing processes of Mexican American ethnic identity formation in mid-century.

Mr. García came of age as a performer in his early twenties during World War II, a period which saw dramatic changes in the social, economic, and cultural situation of *mexicanos* in southern Texas. From the beginning of the twentieth century to the 1930s, commercial farming dominated by Anglo settlers had progressively replaced the older ranching economy, bringing significant changes in productive relations. Native-born Tejanos were forced to become wage laborers, and new immigrants fleeing the poverty and chaos of revolutionary Mexico added to their numbers. Drawn by the prospect of better-paying jobs and an escape from rural labor controls, *mexicanos* began migrating to cities like San Antonio and Houston (Montejano 1987:217). The industrialization associated with World War II was one of the most important causes of this increasingly rapid urbanization of the Tejano population, which had already begun in the 1930s (Peña 1985:124-25). All of these processes contributed to a sharpening of class distinctions among *mexicanos* (García 1991). Mr. García's life and that of his family was very much caught up in these processes. He himself was the U.S.-born child of a family of immigrant entertainers who had formed a traveling tent show in the early teens. Based in San Antonio, the Carpa García, performed in urban *barrios* and small towns throughout Texas, often following the cotton harvest and entertaining the farmworkers with an eclectic mix of song and dance, circus acts, magic shows, and comic sketches.

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

Mr. García's character adapted this second, celebratory discourse of Mexican working-class masculinity to the South Texas context, where the figure was no less controversial. In its theater reviews San Antonio's *la Prensa,* a prominent elite Spanish-language newspaper, had long linked the stage incarnation of the *pelado* to negative stereotypes of Mexicans in the Anglo media, calling the figure "a discredit for those who do not know Mexico" (Kanellos 1990:82). But for rural and urban working-class audiences, characters like don Fito were a source of endless amusement. Stumbling on stage in mismatched rags, clownlike makeup, a messy wig, and an unusually long tie, he engaged the audience and the show's master of ceremonies in an exhuberant exchange of jokes, local anecdotes, and racy double entendres. After a succession of such exchanges and a narrative joke or two, Mr. García would end his act with a song parody such as the following, accompanied by his brother Manolo on piano.

[the parody]

A medias copas (parodia)[1] *por R. García circa 1940*	**Halfway drunk** (parody, gloss)
1. Cuyo ya, sesenta y nueve	Whose now, seventy-nine,
2. Y allí, tengo mi jacal	And there, I have my *jacal* ("hut").
3. Por cama, tengo un petate,	For my bed, I have a *petate* ("reed mat"),
4. Por almohada, un cajón;	For my pillow, a crate;
5. Un sillón, mocho y chinchoso	A buggy, broken armchair
6. Que la vieja me dejó.	That the *vieja* ("broad") left me.
7. En un clavo están colgadas (sus calzones),	From a nail are hanging
8. Unas enaguas chorreadas	A couple of dirty slips
9. Que la ingrata me dejó;	That the ungrateful woman left me;[2]
10. Un perro, flaco, amarillo	A skinny, yellow dog,
11. Que de pulgas me llenó	Who covered me with fleas.
(estribillo)	**(chorus)**
12. Por esa ingratitud	For that ingratitude
13. Que no puedo olvidar,	That I cannot forget,
14. Estoy a medias copas.	I am halfway drunk.
15. Me las voy a curar.	I'm going to cure myself.
16. Ya a medias copas, yo	Now halfway drunk, I
17. Recuerdo su traición,	Remember her betrayal,
18. Que triste y atontado	Who left me stunned and sad
19. Por otro, me dejó.	For another.
20. Parrandas y borracheras	Carousing and drunkenness,
21. No sé lo que voy a hacer.	I don't know what I'm going to do.
22. La culpa que me las ponga	The blame I get for it all
23. La tiene esa infiel mujer.	Belongs to that unfaithful woman.
24. No encuentro quién me consuele.	I find no one to comfort me.
25. Sin camisa me quedé.	I'm left without a shirt.
26. Los amigos ya no me invitan.	Now my friends don't buy me drinks.
27. No hay quién me de una copita	There's nobody to give me a little shot
28. Ni un vasito de aguamiel.	Or a glass of *aguamiel* ("maguey-juice").
29. Sino al contrario, se burlan	On the contrary, they jeer
30. Que mi vieja me hizo güey.	That my *vieja* made me a *güey* (lit. "ox"/ fig."impotent fool").
(estribillo)	**(chorus)**
31. Por esa ingratitud	For that ingratitude
32. Que no puedo olvidar,	That I cannot forget,
33. Estoy a medias copas.	I am halfway drunk.
34. Me las voy a curar.	I'm going to cure myself.
35. Y un consejo les doy	And I'll give some advice
36. A los que oyendo están	To those who are listening
37. Que esas viejas chorreadas	That they send those dirty *viejas*

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[1] I thank Richard Flores, Jessica Montalvo, Nadjah Ríos, and Angélica Bautista for their close proofreading of my translation of the parody and the original. I especially thank Susana Kaiser, whose knowledge of Buenos Aires revealed important details in the original that would have been unintelligible otherwise.

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

38. Les manden . . . a bañar.	. . . To take a bath.[3]

[the original]

A media luz (original) *por C. Lenzi y E. Donato, 1925* (Romano 1989)	**In half-light** (original, gloss)
1. Corrientes tres-cuatro-ocho,	Three- four-eight Corrientes Street,
2. Segundo piso, ascensor.	Second floor, the elevator;
3. No hay porteros ni vecinos,	There are no custodians or neighbors,
4. Adentro cocktail y amor ...	Inside, cocktails and love.
5. Pisito que puso Maple,	A little flat, furnished by Maple.[4]
6. Piano, estera y velador;	A piano, a mat, and a nightstand;
7. Un telefón que contesta,	A telephone for answering,
8. Una vitrola que llora	A victrola that weeps out
9. Viejos tangos de mi flor	Old tangos of my youth.
10. Y un gato de porcelana	And a cat made of porcelain
11. Pa' que no maulle al amor.	So that it won't meow at love.
.**(estribillo)**	**(chorus)**
12 ¡Y todo a media luz,	And all in half-light,
13. Que brujo es el amor!	For love is a wizard!
14. A media luz los besos	In half-light the kisses,
15. A media luz los dos.	In half-light, the two of us.
16. Y todo a media luz.	And all in half-light,
17. Crepúsculo interior,	Interior twilight,
18. ¡Qué suave terciopelo	What soft velvet (is),
19. La media luz de amor!	The half-light of love
20. Juncal doce veinticuatro,	Twelve-twenty-four Juncal Street
21. Telefoneá sin temor;	Call without fear;
22. De tarde, té con masitas,	In the afternoon, tea and pastries,
23. De noche, tango y cantar;	At night, tango and song;
24. Los domingos, té danzante,	On Sundays, a tea dance,
25. Los lunes, desolación.	On Mondays, desolation.
26. Hay de todo en la casita,	The house has some of everything,
27. Almohadones y divanes,	Great cushions and divans,
28. Como en botica . . . cocó,	Enough coke to stock a pharmacy,
29. Alfombras que no hacen ruido,	Carpets that don't make noise,
30. Y mesa puesta al amor.	And the table set for love.
(estibillo)	**(chorus)**
31. ¡Y todo a media luz,	And all in half-light,
32. Que brujo es el amor!	For love is a magician!
33. A media luz los besos	In half-light the kisses,
34. A media luz los dos.	In half-light, the two of them.
35. Y todo a media luz.	And all in half-light,
36. Crepúsculo interior,	Interior twilight,
37. ¡Qué suave terciopelo	What soft velvet (is),

[3]The pause in the middle of this line may lead some listeners to expect the sentence to end ". . . a la chingada" ("to fuck"), "al diablo" ("to the devil") or some other such expression. The actual ending of the sentence "les manden . . . a bañar" ("send them . . . to take a bath") frustrates this expectation.
[4]Maple is a prestigious furniture store in Buenos Aires.

Like all parodies, "A medias copas" is a metacultural text in that it foregrounds the generic conventions and the "social, ideological, and political-economic connections" of the original (Briggs and Bauman 1992:147). In Bakhtin's terms, then, the tango is the object of representation, "the hero of the parody" (1981:51). The tango enjoyed a florescence in Mexico beginning in the 1930s (Sareli 1977:13), and was probably brought to Texas by touring musical and theatrical acts from that country that visited San Antonio and other southwestern cities, as well as commercial recordings.. The form was never popular with the accordion-based *conjunto*, an ensemble which has come to symbolize *mexicano* working class identity in Texas (Peña 1985). All available evidence suggests that to the extent that the tango was performed live in southern Texas, it was performed by the middle-class *orquestas* (large wind ensembles modeled after American jazz bands) and by solo singers. It is partly for this reason that the tango was received in southern Texas as an exotic, cosmopolitan, high-society genre, more a symbol of a generalized, encompassing pan Latin-American culture than of local tradition. In Greg Urban's terms, the tango formed part of an omega culture, from the local Tejano point of view (1993).

The tango's middle-class association in Texas is the result of its complex transnational history. According to Marta Savigliano, the tango first emerged in Argentina in the late nineteenth century as a scandalous, tense dance "in which a male/female embrace tried to heal the racial and class displacement provoked by urbanization and war" (1995:30). In the lyrics of these early "ruffianesque" tangos, treacherous, cruel women betray their male romantic partners, often by seeking out men of higher status. In these songs, then, "class issues are interpreted as a sex problem," and "women are accused of lacking class loyalty and are assured a decadent and lonely end" (62). Originally a stigmatized form in Argentina, the tango spread to the theaters and dance halls of Paris and London, driven by a colonialist desire for the exotic. Like the raw materials imported to the metropolitan centers of industry and converted into industrial products to be sold to the dependent south, the tango later returned to its land of origin in a refined form. The romantic tango that arrived in Mexico in the 1930s, then, was the product of this global traffic in emotional capital. This would be especially true of *"A media luz, "* the song that Mr. García chose to parody,

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

Rodolfo García's parody engages its original much in the way that a retort in a verbal duel engages the utterance that precedes it: by using a minimal economy of formal effort to achieve a maximally semantically powerful reversal (Sherzer 1987:306, n7). In the first line of the parody, a made-up address mimics the Buenos Aires street address that appears in the original. In line 2, the luxury apartment is replaced with a *jacal*, a house of sticks and adobe that had only recently ceased to be common among the rural poor in Mexican American south Texas. The piano, night-stand, victrola and telephone **(lines 6-9)** are replaced with the *petate* (a humble reed-mat) **(line 3)** a crate for a pillow **(line 4)**, a broken armchair full of bedbugs **(line 5)**, and dirty slips left behind by the cruel, offstage woman who is the parody's ostensible object **(line 7-9)**.[5] Standing metonymically for the lower stratum of the *ingrata's* absent body, this detail carnivalizes and embodies the sentimentality of the original. This tactic continues in the final lines of the first stanza, which juxtaposes the porcelain cat of the original with a living dog whose fleas violate the boundaries of the speaker's body.

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

". . . can be either the object of male disputes or the trigger of a

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

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

Where the original places its female character in the first position, Mr. García's parody clearly places her in the second. In doing so, it returns the romantic tango to its ruffianesque roots. But the parody's intertextual manipulation does not stop there. The whiny confession of male weakness that characterizes the ruffianesque tango, with its construction of a treacherous, cruel, absent woman, closely resembles a similar trope that Mr. García's audience would have associated with the greater Mexican *canción ranchera*. The *mexicano* ideology of *lo ranchero* differs in some ways from the transgressive lumpenproletarian masculinity celebrated in the tango, focusing as it does on ". . . self-sufficiency, candor, simplicity, sincerity, and patriotism . . ." (1984:11). Yet the *canción ranchera*, like the ruffianeque tango, often tends to portray such masculinity through its breach, by showing the *ranchero's* vulnerability to the stratagems of a woman.

The second stanza of the parody follows the original out of the intimate sphere. But where the original tango describes a rigorously schedued series of more or less public recreational activities circumscribed by the work-week **(lines 20-25)**, the parody breaks out of the *jacal* into the undisciplined male public sphere of the *cantina.* There, the speaker vents his feelings of impotence, loss, and abandonment in a *parranda* that refuses to recognize boundaries and schedules. But even in this space of mourning, he is an object of ridicule, for his treacherous ex-lover has made a *güey* ("impotent fool") of him. This trope of the abandoned man driven to drink is also the topic of the chorus, which displays less parallelism with the original than the two other stanzas, and the parody treats this subject with some degree of seriousness. In interviews, Mr. García has argued that this image of betrayed heterosexual love and male humiliation as a universal theme. When I and other researchers and have questioned him about the sources of his parodies, he has tended to maintain that they come "*de la realidad—de lo que pasa*" ("from reality — from what happens"). What appears as a highly stylized plot to the outsider is for him a crystallization of the emotional impact of actual events.

But in parodies like a *medias copas*, Mr. García foregrounded the genred nature of even this trope by juxtaposing it with the carnivalesque, bodily details

discussed above. The panties hanging in dirty water, the vermin which infest the body of the whiny narrator, and the dirtiness attributed to women in general in the song's final misogynistic jab **(lines 37-38)**, bring the heart-centered sentiment of the tango and the ranchera down to the generating lower stratum of the body. Furthermore, Don Fito's clownlike costume, his exaggerated slapstick movements on stage, and the bawdy *picardía* of his lyrics contrast sharply with the genteel passion of the romantic tango and the wounded pride of the *ranchera*. The seriousness of the male narrator's self-pity becomes relativized and is placed in "cheerfully irreverent quotation marks" (Bakhtin 1981:55). Bakhtin argues that in all parodies there is an overarching language that parodies, a matrix variety whose presence in the hybridized discourse is unmarked and which contains the other genres. In the case of Mr. García's song parodies, the language that parodies is the picaresque language of the *pelado* himself.

To summarize, I have argued that in its original context of performance, Mr. García's parody articulated a distinctly local Mexican American identity which was strongly linked to a sense of working-class masculinity. The parody accomplished this through a series of symbolic inversions of the original song which juxtaposed the conventions of the romantic tango with those of the ruffianesque tango and the Mexican *canción ranchera*. By invoking symbols of traditional *mexicano* material culture and rural poverty, as well as the longing masculine subject of the *ranchera*, Mr. García reversed the original song's bourgeoisified focus on luxury goods and interior space. Perhaps the most salient generic features in play were stereotypical images of masculinity and femininity. The parody's contrast with the original in this respect marked a contrast based both on distinctions of class and on distinctions between local (alpha-cultural) vs. supra-local (omega-cultural) orientations. Indeed, by containing the tango, an omega-cultural genre, within genres associated with local identity, the parody symbolically inverted the alpha/omega hierarchy itself.

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