

Jesusa Rodríguez and Her Cabaret Theatre

by

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ABSTRACT

This Masters Thesis explores playwright, director, and performer Jesusa Rodríguez's satirical treatment of Mexican society, politics, and government in her two sketches *La gira mamal de la Coatlicue* and *La Malinche en: Dios T.V.*, and in the one-act play *Sor Juana en Almoloya. Pastorela virtual*.

In her work Rodríguez deconstructs and revises the official story to render new versions of old myths and beliefs. In her cabaret theatre she intertwines themes of the past and the present to trigger the audience's imagination, in an attempt to awaken their interest in Mexico's cultural roots and to make provocative comments on societal ills. With her performances Rodríguez strives to create a more inclusive and egalitarian society.


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Introduction

Jesusa Rodríguez's *teatro cabaret* is a lively cultural phenomenon that celebrates the ongoing shift from male dominance, rigid social mores, and exclusion, to a more egalitarian, open, and inclusive society within today's Mexico. Rodríguez, a contemporary parodist who allows no detail in the political agenda to escape her attention, also goes back to prehispanic roots and Mexican history to raise the consciousness of her audience. The task she has made her own is to contribute her share as a Mexican woman to the improvement of the social and political conditions in her country. By setting past and present side by side, intertwining them and comparing them, she uncovers deeply layered myths and beliefs that have been hindering the social change. In the big arena of Mexican theatre, Rodríguez's brief but potent performances first build pressure within the largely middle-class audience by insulting every established social icon and then release it through the safety valve of her irresistible humour.

Feminist consciousness is spreading rapidly and conquering sectors of society that only a few decades ago seemed almost unreachable. In a country with such deeply rooted patriarchal values as Mexico, the evolution has been slow, but there is an ever increasing number of women involved in the public sphere who are creating new attitudes toward old and worn out structures by speaking up, writing down, or performing their views and perspectives. Their aim is to bring about a new, inclusive society in which women publicly and formally claim their share in leadership and, in so doing, break taboos long supported by the national mythology. By deconstructing and revising the official story, these women confirm that the established myths are mere "versions" which can and should be subject to change. A case in point is the letter written by a group of Catholic women to Pope John Paul II

on the occasion of his 1990 visit to Mexico. When their letter was only summarized in the press, while others of a more traditional bent were published in their entirety, the journal *Debate Feminista*¹ printed the full text several months later. In her introduction, Teresita de Barbieri identified the authors as “un grupo de religiosas, catequistas y laicas” in order to give a sense of the levels of religious commitment among the writers (357). By publishing the full text in the feminist journal, Barbieri and the women involved show their determination to publicize their opposition to the Church’s moral rigidity concerning sexuality and reproduction, the imposition of obligations upon women by the Church, and the limited place reserved for them within a church that does not allow them to participate in decision making, all issues that they insist on bringing to the attention of the highest authorities.

Among the women who are involved in the public sphere--be it Church or Mexican politics, literature, or performance of various kinds--is Jesusa Rodríguez, a well known and outspoken playwright, director, and actress, who is making her contribution in the form of theatre. Through her art, particularly through her *teatro cabaret*, Rodríguez is able to contribute to this paradigm-shifting development that is changing the face of Mexico.

Sandra Cypess believes that in their pursuit of knowledge and understanding, women like Rodríguez are looking to the past in order to view the present with

¹*Debate Feminista* is the now ten-year-old Mexican feminist biannual periodical through which prominent figures in culture and politics, as well as supporters and friends of the feminist cause at any level, publish news and voice their opinions and concerns. Jesusa Rodríguez has an article at the end of each number. She publishes sketches, plays, and commentaries on a variety of issues.

newly acquired clarity and with the strength needed to uncover the myths that have prevented any real change in Mexican society (“From Colonial Constructs” 504). The dominant discourse established by a very few is now being challenged and reconstructed by these women who demand a part in shaping the future and who inspire hope in the marginalized by inviting them to join in the action.

Rodríguez’s work is helpful in following this evolution of consciousness, especially so through three of her plays, “La Gira mamal de la Coatlicue” (1990), “La Malinche en: Dios T.V.” (1991), and “Sor Juana en Almoloya. (Pastorela virtual)” (1995). The three Mexican icons, Coatlicue, La Malinche, and Sor Juana, and the research done about them, are exemplary of the move towards a wider understanding of the role of women in history and how that role is changing.

The choice of these plays over the many others produced in the last ten years in Rodríguez’s own theatrical space allows a close look at the construction of female identity in Mexico. All three plays have in common a main character who is a feminine figure well known in the country, and they represent three stages in its history.

Coatlicue, the goddess of the pre-Columbian nations and mother of all the gods to come, is the icon of the indigenous roots. La Malinche, translator and guide for the Spanish conquerors, as the symbolic mother of the first Mexican, considered the amalgamation of the Spanish and the Indian cultures, stands at the crossroads of a new age. Sor Juana, a Jeronymite nun of the seventeenth century, is the *criolla* who identified with the land she was born in. She represents the woman who voiced her passion and proved that knowledge and education were not solely the realm of men.

By taking the three female icons under her creative wing and bringing them onto the stage, Rodríguez encourages the Mexican people to search within their own rich heritage for answers to the acute problems rampant in their society. In the search for their resolution there is no lack of examples to be found of women with extraordinary qualities in Mexico. Female strength and pride is present from the origins of the Mesoamerican native cultures through the encounter between the two cultures that would give rise to the Mexican nation, through the budding liberation from Spanish control over Mexican creativity, up to the present moment, when a talented woman is shaking her audiences with powerful performances at the turn of the new millennium.

Jesusa Rodríguez actively engages in shocking, entertaining, and educating her audience in her own theatrical space, the restored theatre La Capilla and the now ten-year-old bar-cabaret El Hábito, where she staged the three plays that will be analyzed.

My discussion of Rodríguez's work will begin with a chapter that provides biographical details on the author and a description of her finding her own voice and her physical space to follow her calling.

The second chapter raises the issues of the importance of theatrical space and the debate over what theatre is capable of accomplishing in social and political terms. Historical and theoretical background will add to the understanding of the role of the artist and her work, while a description of *teatro cabaret*, the genre of theatre particularly associated with Rodríguez's performance art² and deeply rooted

²*Teatro cabaret* is only one of the genres in which Rodríguez is versed. She has been involved in playwrighting, staging, and acting in opera, as well

in the Mexican tradition, will lead into the third chapter, where I discuss Rodríguez's interpretation of cabaret theatre and her place in contemporary Mexican theatre. The chapter includes a close look at the term "popular theatre" and the significance of this form and discusses the controversy that has arisen over Rodríguez's classification.

In each of the subsequent three chapters, I analyse in detail one of Rodríguez's three dramatic works that illustrate the relation of Mexico's past and present. In treating Rodríguez's use of the three iconic feminine figures, I discuss them within the context of their respective ages, as well as the revisionist views of them in present times. Chapter IV treats *La gira mamá de la Coatlicue*, a sketch featuring the mythical earth goddess, mother of all deities, and hence original ancestor of the Mexican people. After a short description of the myth surrounding the goddess, follows a description of Rodríguez's Coatlicue, who has come out of her sequestration in the museum to remind her kin that the roots of their civilization are alive regardless of the imposition of newer cultures and the deviations of power-thirsty individuals. Chapter V presents a discussion of *La Malinche en: Dios T.V.*, a sketch that describes a present-day Mexico still battling to free itself from external intervention and internal corruption. A brief study of the role of La Malinche according to the official history and the changes that have been occurring in recent years is followed by the analysis of Rodríguez's parody on present political events, implying a *déjà vu* through the historical moment that the playwright chooses to interpret. Chapter VI is dedicated to the study of the one-act play, *Sor Juana en Almoloya. (Pastorela virtual)*. After the presentation of a general overview of the

as in classical, experimental, and other theatrical forms.

life and work of the *Fénix de América*, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, I examine some critical work written concerning her. Then I continue with a close look at Rodríguez's play that includes a discussion of issues raised within the piece, such as fossilized thinking, institutional corruption, and homophobia.

The objective of this thesis is to offer one example of the lively participation of Mexican women in the process of birthing a long-awaited paradigm shift. The playwright and actress Jesusa Rodríguez is actively engaged in bringing about this change. Through an imaginative reworking of old traditions, she has made herself a unique place in Mexico City's world of spectacle.

Chapter I

The Playwright

Jesusa Rodríguez was born in Mexico City in 1955. She started her professional work under the direction of the maestro Julio Castillo who, according to one of the major playwrights and critics of Mexican theatre, Carlos Solórzano, is gifted with very peculiar, instinctual attitudes and poetic perception (Solórzano, *Testimonios teatrales de México* 93). Solórzano calls Castillo's dedication to his profession "una perpetua condena de búsqueda de su propia verdad en los textos dramáticos" (93). Rodríguez argues that it was thanks to Castillo's vision and guidance that she did not drop her theatrical pursuits at an early stage: ". . . entré al CUT (Centro Universitario de Teatro) y ahí fue cuando se me quitaron las ganas de hacer teatro. . . . Sin embargo conocí en esa escuela a Julio Castillo, un director fantástico, y me fui a trabajar con él" ("Reinventando" 140). In her interview with Gastón Adolfo Alzate and Paola Marín she talks about many disenchanting experiences in the performing world:

La gente tiene mucha envidia . . . , las condiciones de trabajo son horribles. . . en el teatro comercial tienes que estar al servicio de un empresario que quiere ganar dinero, . . . en el teatro universitario tienes que estar al servicio de un funcionario que quiere "quedar bien", . . . en el teatro cabaret tienes que estar al servicio de un dueño que quiere que "se digan" ciertos chistes o por el contrario que "no se digan." En fin siempre tienes que estar al servicio de algo que no es la obra de teatro o la obra artística que estás produciendo y eso no lo soporté. ("Reinventando" 140)

This fierce rejection of any type of dependence is what characterizes Rodríguez's work and what eventually drove her to start her own group.

Jesusa Rodríguez is a director, playwright, actress, lighting engineer, illuminator, scenographer, entrepreneur, and founder of independent performance groups like Sombras Blancas, Atrezo, and Divas, A.C. Her versatility has permitted Rodríguez to become one of the most outstanding women in Latin American theatre of recent decades. She has been called a “fenómeno teatral de que dan cuenta tanto sus violentos detractores como sus admiradores apasionados” (Harmony, “Yourcenar” 317) and her cabaret a cultural expression of a “micropolítica de resistencia” (Alzate, “Jesusa” 81). Her political engagement as well as her playful nature is exemplified in the *Debate Feminista* of April 2000, where she is described in the following terms: “Su verdadera profesión es conductora de eventos de solidaridad y su verdadera vocación es jugadora de póker” (325).

Rodríguez’s partner, Liliana Felipe, born in the fifties in Argentina, is a pianist, composer, songwriter, and singer. Felipe qualifies herself as “Argentina, música, cabaretera y agricultora” (*Debate* 324). Her artistic contribution to their joint performances is primarily the music that she composes for Rodríguez’s sketches and dramas, in which she also sings and plays the piano or other instruments, and acts.

Beginnings

Liliana and Jesusa have been together since 1980, Liliana accompanying almost all of Jesusa’s works as composer and musical director. In the same year, Rodríguez and Felipe opened the cabaret El Fracaso and started the Grupo Divas, A.C., an association of actresses and playwrights with whom, in the following years, they performed important theatrical productions. Rodríguez says:

Conocí a Liliana Felipe y decidimos abrir un antro de vicio en La Conchita, que fue El Fracaso . . . Hicimos varios Fracasos y nos dimos cuenta que la gente necesitaba un espacio de este tipo. Que se podía hacer un teatro sostenido por el público, sin necesidad de depender, ni de presupuestos oficiales, ni de comerciantes del espectáculo. El público puede sostener la investigación en el escenario. (L. H. González)

After staging Shakespeare's "Macbeth", and Carmen Boullosa's homage to Frida Kahlo, "Trece señoritas: homenaje a Frida Kahlo", Rodríguez made an adaptation of Mozart's opera "Don Juan", called "Donna Giovanni", with which her group went on tour. The actress and her Grupo Divas S.A. continued travelling, mainly through Europe and the United States, performing opera and theatre for about seven years until they returned in 1989. From then on Rodríguez dedicated herself to establishing her theatrical space and performing what she wanted and the way she wanted it, "sin presiones, sin censura, sin funcionarios, sin empresarios" ("Reinventando" 141).

In search of new venues to explore their creativity, Rodríguez and Felipe decided to open up a new space where they could collaborate outside the restrictive structure of the traditional and commercial world of performance. Together they restored the theatre La Capilla and founded the bar-cabaret El Hábito, both places located in the heart of Coyoacán, a district in the south of Mexico City. La Capilla was originally conceived by the poet, writer, playwright, and historian, Salvador Novo, with the underlying intention of creating an independent space in which the performing artists could free their impulses without the fear of destructive criticism and censorship. In 1953 Novo separated from the Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes (INBA), where he had been president and director, and restored the ancient colonial

chapel, La Capilla, which he turned into a theatre with 98 seats. The private chapel with excellent acoustics was part of the mansion in which Novo lived until his death in 1974. Here he acted as director and presented his own plays, as well as translated ones of playwrights of the time (such as Beckett, O'Neill, Ibsen, Cocteau, etc.). This was the space in which the great majority of Mexican actors of the fifties had their debuts. At the opening of this new space Novo dedicated it to his audience: "Un público muy especial: culto, distinguido, exigente y capaz o en posibilidad de venir hasta acá a ver una comedia; un público, podríamos decir de patrocinadores no abonados, pero sí fieles al llamado cordial y respetuoso que les hacemos" (Muncy 27).

After Novo's death, Rodríguez and Felipe rented the old mansion from the writer's heir and expanded this ideal, uncensored space dedicated to open expression by adding the second, less formal, but financially more sustainable theatre, the bar El Hábito. The opening of El Hábito was a strategy to create a place for cabaret performances that would attract attention to the whole complex. Both venues, El Hábito and La Capilla, are relatively small, and in an interview with Jean Franco, Rodríguez says about La Capilla: "It is not a commercially viable theatre but we have a bar and the bar subsidizes the small theatre" ("A Touch" 55).³

³Before these venues were opened, Rodríguez and Mexican novelist and playwright Carmen Boullosa had founded the theatre bar El Cuervo, also in Coyoacán. Boullosa later reopened the space as El Hijo del Cuervo. It serves as a gathering place for artists and intellectuals and as a forum for young theatre practitioners whose works are on the fringes of Mexican traditional and commercial theatre (Costantino, "Carmen Boullosa" 183).

Rodríguez and Felipe reinaugurated this independent theatre with the presentation of the prehispanic cabaret *Cielo de abajo*, a piece dedicated to the Aztec underworld. Following this event, Diana Taylor in her article, “‘High Aztec’ or Performing Anthro Pop” called the performers “two of Mexico’s most imaginative and radical women directors-actors-performance artists” (142). In her 1993 article Taylor pointed out that it was exciting that two women artists could own, operate, and even renovate an alternative theatre in the traditional, patriarchal country that is Mexico.

In 1997 Rodríguez started the new theatre company *La Chinga*⁴, *Compañía de Comedia Mexicana* with the intention of staging a spectacle that would change from day to day, depending on the input of the public, improvising as it developed, and incorporating daily events of Mexican life.

Her passion for pre-Columbian history has led her to develop a style “que aprovecha lo popular para ejercer un humor hiriente, en el que la risa es un estallido y la política una práctica de comicidad” (Enríquez 367). Her performance style unites the old traditional parodic presentation with modern day visual and accoustic

⁴The name of the theatre company *La Chinga* derives from the vulgar verb *chingar*. *Una chinga* in colloquial Mexican Spanish means a “real pain”: *Ese trabajo es una chinga*. The masculine form of the word *un chingo* is used in the sense of “a lot”: *Me da un chingo de gusto*, or *te quiero un chingo*. Used in this context, these words are no longer considered expletives, but merely the appropriation by a broader sector of speakers of colloquialisms that strengthen their statements with forceful words.

stage effects. She is known for her utter irreverence in the face of any institutionalized powers. The following comment of Mexico City theatre critic, Olga Harmony, when she draws a parallel between Rodríguez's cabaret and the *commedia dell'arte*⁵, says it all: “esas improvisaciones servían de mucho para escapar a la censura política o religiosa (lo que a Jesusa tiene sin cuidado como nos consta a todos)” (“Compañía”).

Rodríguez's search for independence in her work as well as in her workspace is linked to the innate urge to say what she thinks and when she thinks it. Making theatre is her form of contributing to a better society. She is not and cannot be neutral: “El interés superior de salvar al país nos impide ser neutrales” (Vega, “El interés”). Before the year 2000 elections and while staging the play *El fuego*, she declared to the newspaper *La Jornada* without hesitation:

Queremos que nuestro trabajo en el teatro continúe con vehemencia y sea un granito de arena que contribuya al cambio, recordándole a la sociedad

⁵The *commedia dell'arte* emerged in Tuscany around 1550, although the origins are difficult to trace. It had its roots in the masked comedies of ancient Rome. The form combined mime, improvised and scripted dialogue (often coarse) with tumbling and acrobatics. *Commedia dell'arte* performances and techniques spread throughout Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with offshoots in France, Spain and England; gradually the form lost its satirical force, becoming more stylised, relying less on improvisation and more on extravagant costumes and production (<http://shift.merriweb.com.au/characters/commedia.html>).

mexicana que el actual gobierno federal ha sido genocida y excluyente,
contando siempre con la complicidad del Partido Acción Nacional. (Vega,
“El interés”)

She has a message to spread, and her work is the tool she uses to accomplish it.

Chapter II

Theatrical Space

While discussion of theatrical space is important in treatment of dramatic art in general, it is particularly relevant to the analysis of Jesusa Rodríguez's theatre. Her choice of enclosed, private space--as opposed to open, public space--leads some critics and fellow performers to question the potential of her work for having social or political impact.

Throughout human history outdoor spaces, such as public squares and streets, have been the sites for performances and festivities that involve popular participation. The phenomenon of indoor performances, like the ones held in colleges, palaces, and later in buildings constructed specifically for them, such as opera houses and playhouses, is an evolution of those outdoor public shows and ceremonies into a more sophisticated form of artistic expression. While the main elements of open-air spectacles were dance, mime, dialogue and a story line, the indoor performances mostly involved a script which was to be followed accurately. The Brazilian theatre theorist Augusto Boal writes in his work *Teatro del oprimido*:

Al principio, el teatro era el canto ditirámico: el pueblo libre cantando al aire libre. El carnaval. La fiesta.

Después, las clases dominantes se adueñaron del teatro y construyeron sus muros divisorios. Primero dividieron al pueblo, separando actores de espectadores: gente que hace y gente que mira: ¡se terminó la fiesta! (143)

In Hispanic countries a common ground for performance in the open has been first the central square and then the *corral*, a roofless enclosure where the spectacle takes place. Judith Weiss describes how these fenced-in spaces were the

first ones to be occupied by professional theatre productions (97). By the end of the sixteenth century, most major urban centers in Spain as well as in its colonies had such locales, and the works of the most popular playwrights (Lope de Vega, Tirso de Molina, Calderón de la Barca) were performed inside them before a very mixed audience. Theatre companies acquired these permanent *corrales*, which in their turn were the forerunners of the playhouses built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By the early nineteenth century the *corrales* that had not yet disappeared had become marginalized and were occupied by the *carpas*, mobile circus tents. Most playhouses, opera houses, and coliseums were erected in the eighteenth century, and by the time the wars of independence broke out in the colonies, every main city had its principal theatre, which sometimes also served as an opera house. The coliseum presented circus acts and music hall acts or variety shows (sketches, songs, comedy). The *coliseo de la ciudad de México* has one of the earliest programmes on record (1788), and also had a permanent company. The *coliseo* became important as a mediating space, because it housed under the same roof marginal forms as well as theatre, and introduced all of them to a broad audience. In this way the coliseums can be viewed as the successors of the *corrales*. In the late nineteenth century theatre houses were mushrooming everywhere, parallel to the rise of a middle class and a working class with more spending power. Playhouses and opera houses soon were used by touring companies and revues, many of which had originated in the marginal spaces of the circus and the tent shows. The commercial theatre houses of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century are the most closely related to the *coliseos*, in physical design as well as in functionality. By the late nineteenth century they provided the seed for the national theatres that emerged with the growing class spectrum of the audiences. In this way a formerly bourgeois

environment was penetrated by musical comedy and revues that came straight from the streets.

Historically, the various spaces described above, which have served for performances of all kinds, are interconnected. *Corrales*, *coliseos*, and commercial playhouses have a stable structure and are commonly used as venues for productions of scripted plays by professional artists. Public squares and vacant lots used by circuses and tent shows are non-specific open spaces, temporarily but routinely allocated for theatrical performance. These venues permit artistic expression of marginalized social groups. *Corrales* and colleges are spaces owned by institutions. Public squares and college stages are used for performances primarily conceived to promote or further a political program or for ideological propaganda. *Corrales*, circuses and tent shows, and commercial theatre houses are controlled by impresarios as commercial ventures (Weiss 100).

The cabaret performance that Rodríguez creates takes place mostly, but not exclusively, in a private space that synthesizes a tent show or *carpa* atmosphere located inside a permanent building, where independent and extremely provocative theatre is relatively safe from official censorship. More recently, however, she has found her way to the streets, a change about which she comments: “Yo me tardé casi 20 años en decidirme a hacer teatro popular, callejero. Empecé hace dos años y ahora he logrado hacer una compañía que se llama La Chinga. Está circulando por toda la ciudad” (L.H. González). In the year 2000 Rodríguez has staged a massive production in the newly renovated Fábrica de Artes y Oficios de Oriente (FARO), bringing together a handful of professional actors with approximately eighty youngsters gathered in “la delegación Iztapalapa, una de las más pobladas y al mismo tiempo más abandonadas culturalmente” (Mandoki). The mass performance

of *El fuego* is proof that Rodríguez continues to explore new forms of expression and her creativity is expanding and encompassing larger audiences.

Genre

There are three elements in Rodríguez's artistic creation that correspond to three forms of her perception of the world. The first is a romantic form, which shows deep nostalgia at the contemplation of European culture, which can be perceived in her operatic production. The second is a mythical form and corresponds to the theatre as an eternal return to the sacred texts. Here the artist takes old texts and gives them a new language to present them to the contemporary audience in an attempt to render them understandable and relevant to today's issues. The third is a form to represent the world as in ever-present chaos and corresponds to the cabaret in which Rodríguez finds a certain aesthetic and ethical solution to the conflicts that the two first forms pose to her. She sees the cabaret as an alchemy in which all arts and all levels--serious, light, cultured, and popular--are amalgamated. In the cabaret the story/history is dirty and cruel, but told in a hilarious fashion that imitates the reigning chaos and the absurdity of Mexican reality (Alzate, "Jesusa" 89).

The key component in Rodríguez's work comes directly from the Mexican tradition of the *teatro de carpa* of the beginning of the twentieth century. Going back to sixteenth-century Spanish accounts of the Aztecs and Mayas, Ignacio Merino Lanzilotti argues that the Mexican is *carpero* by nature, having a penchant for satirizing society and politics in a dramatic and humorous way through the use of exaggeration and comic stereotypes similar to those of the *commedia dell'arte* troupes starting in sixteenth-century Italy (Kelty 47).

Since the beginning the *carpero* has engaged in popular theatre with political aims. The prehispanic *carpero* reflected the philosophy of the *tlamatinime* or wise men, who did not accept the official belief system of the Aztecs, which was based on sacrifice and aggressive military policy arising from a mystico-militaristic world view (Versényi 11). *Tlamatinime* were not theatre practitioners; nevertheless they believed in transcendental communication with the divine through art. Metaphysical knowledge was to be achieved by poetry (in Nahuatl “flower and song”), not by human sacrifice. Aztec artists joined the *tlamatinime* in their search for universal truth by criticizing accepted ideologies and metanarratives. There were also the *tlaquetzqui* or travelling troubadours who performed flowery dramatic poetry, as well as obscene and farcical dramatic interludes, and the more serious dramatic elaborations on mythical themes. The *tetlahuehuetzquiti* acted as transformational educators, opposing the mainstream Aztec and later Spanish religious theatre. They often got themselves in trouble for criticizing warriors and priests in *carpero* performances. Through these they vented their disagreement with the imposition of rituals reinforced by an elite that was eager to maintain its status quo. In the rich indigenous tradition of the performing arts there were also puppeteers (*teuquiquiztli*), buffoons, and comic artists who used stereotypical characters (old men, fools, people with exaggerated illnesses, etc.) who staged their spectacles in plazas, marketplaces and dining halls. Their popular mode contrasted with the formal, civic rituals and sacrificial ceremonies. However, these popular performances often took place right alongside religious processions and on these festive occasions the comic imitation and ridicule of the chiefs was permitted (Merlín 69).

After the Spanish arrived in 1520 the *carperos* continued performing satirical works using stock characters, eventually directing them at the newcomers. Early on,

the Spanish missionaries started using theatre to convert the indigenous peoples to Christianity. With religious and political ends in mind, the Spaniards staged mass spectacles by translating the evangelical theatre into the vernacular and by recruiting the locals as actors. As early as this the Mesoamericans poured their *carpero* spirit into the religious theatre.

The Spanish also brought with them a satirical tradition that synthesized with the Aztec *carpero* tradition. European and Aztec forms intertwined into popular inversions of authoritative hierarchies and served to vent complaints and to temporarily break out of the reality. An example of this is the Spanish religious as well as secular genre of the pastoral (*Officium Pastorum*) that was transformed into the Mexican *pastorela*. The *pastorela* is a product of medieval liturgical drama, carnival, pre-Christian fertility rites, and Aztec comic acting. As early as 1585 secular *pastorelas* became too profane in the eyes of the Church, and legislation was enacted in order to protect the existing morality, however unsuccessfully. Although Church regulations limited the profane elements in official religious drama, profane secular versions thrived. At the end of the eighteenth century, Mexican thinker and writer José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, who had been attracted by the popular character of the genre, reveals the following in a note to his own *Pastorela*: “Las mejores pastorelas o coloquios son endiabladas, llenas de impropiedades, violentas . . . dignas de excluirse de todo teatro público . . . Yo las he visto detestables y quemables” (23). He says that the deplorable state of the *pastorela* incited him to write his own, which, although not free of defects, at least followed the traditional ideas of the genre: “Reafirmar en el pueblo la fe en el triunfo del bien sobre el mal y

celebrar con alegría, a través de las almas sencillas de los pastores, el nacimiento de Cristo” (23).⁶

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries street performers continued to ply their trade in gathering places for the masses. Circus-like performers (e.g. acrobats, tightrope walkers, etc.) had survived from the Aztec tradition, and when in 1786 the first European-style circus arrived in Mexico, the popularity of the ancestral performers rose. Mexican circuses were born with the sketch comedy, *carpero* styles, and other emerging entertainment forms (Keltly 61).

At the end of the nineteenth century the *zarzuela* (popular musical comedy form in which dialogue alternates with melodic arias, choruses, and dances) dominated Mexican theatres and deeply influenced the newly arising *revista mexicana*. The *revista política* employed the same alternating structure as the *zarzuela*, but usually satirized the political situation, although in many instances any attempt at a clear-cut distinction between these forms is not possible because the overlap is great. 1870 saw the birth of the first Mexican political review, which summarized the year’s events satirically in musical comedy form. The *revista mexicana* continued to evolve into ever more daring attacks on political and societal figures. The satire was alternated with the *tiples*, women *carpistas*, who were

⁶*Pastorelas* are to this day extremely popular and performed all over Mexico around the Christmas season inside theatres and other buildings, as well as outdoors. There are national and international competitions for the best *pastorela* organized all over Mexico every year. In an imaginative and highly parodic way, Jesusa Rodríguez stages her own *pastorelas* summing up the most important and controversial events of the respective year.

known by this name for their soprano voices and who added greatly to the show. In 1910, at the beginning of the Mexican Revolution, the *revista mexicana* dominated the scenes on Mexican stages.

During the first thirty years of the twentieth century the major theatres (Principal, Arbeu, and Renacimiento) were in the hands of a monopoly that promoted its authors and actors, who were preferably foreigners, to the exclusion of anybody else. The effect of this was that the majority of Mexican actors, big and small,

tenían que correr la legua por las ciudades del interior del país o hacer lista de espera en el viejo teatro Hidalgo o en los numerosos jacalones que a partir de 1900 comenzaron a aparecer por todos los barrios de esta ciudad capital. Eran los únicos espacios donde los actores mexicanos podían trabajar.

(Ceballos 34)

In the *carpa* theatre circus was mixed with frivolous theatre and became the *teatro de revista* of the marginalized in the twenties and thirties. The *tiples* appeared in daring, at times scandalous clothing as singers, dancers, and also as performers. An example of this theatre was the unsurpassed symbol of Mexican comic tradition, “Cantinflas” (Mario Moreno) who, like many others, originated in the *carpa* and later on went to the *teatro de revista*, and finally to the cinema.⁷

⁷Héctor Argente says: “Por ese entonces el cine, que comenzaba a convertirse en industria, no interesaba mucho a los actores profesionales y muchas veces los productores de películas silentes debían recurrir a los intérpretes de las carpas que eran los más necesitados debido a las limitaciones del sueldo diario” (44).

The *teatro de carpa* goes beyond the *teatro de revista* by using crude word play, the scatological, and the obscene. The expletives are generously accentuated in the *carpa*, and according to Alzate, it is the best school of double meaning (“Jesusa” 90). It is therefore not surprising that this genre is often subjected to censure. The *carpa* generates a specific form of humour and social criticism, and because of the quick pace, the popularity, and the constant change of the sketches or plays, synchronized with the political day-to-day events, it does not carry the weight of a cultural, pedagogical purpose that other theatre productions had in the time after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920).

The authors of lyrical *sainetes* (short non-musical comic interludes) and *zarzuelas* performed in the *revistas* were journalists of popular background, neither intellectuals nor academicians. Many of the dramatic, comedic, and *zarzuela* works were circumstantial, attached to the journalistic formulas of information: “comentario y chascarrillo sobre un realismo anecdótico o de pormenores” (Alzate, “Jesusa” 90). The *cómico* of the *carpa* was the *pelado*, the picaresque character of the neighbourhood. In his study *Carpas de México* Pedro Granados wrote the following about the origins of this genre:

La revolución . . . asola al circo, . . . lo destruye, haciendo que la familia circense se refugie en las ciudades que tiene a la mano. . . . Pasa el tiempo y el circense europeo, acostumbrado a vivir bajo la lona, idea hacer teatrillos de lona portátiles, o sea, las carpas. En ellas hacen pantomimas, bailables, canciones, saltos maromas, pero ante todo el payaso, que siempre fue y ha sido el personaje central del espectáculo. (53)

Whole families of actors and musicians learned and practiced their art in these newly appearing tents that could be set up on marginal sites. What is curious and

paradoxical about the mobility of the *carpa* is that, although an essentially nomadic institution, it offered unity and continuity. It was often one particular act that attracted the crowds. Certain roles had to be filled to ensure an already obtained popularity. In contrast to this phenomenon, the permanent spaces that were built beginning in the eighteenth century to showcase high culture served both resident companies and the more prestigious foreign artists on tour, in other words, those on the move.

Another genre that contributed to the ongoing evolution out of which Rodríguez's style has developed is the *género mexicano*, a conglomerate of satirical and parodical entertainment forms in musical or non-musical form, based on Mexican themes. Different sketches, or sketches and music, or dance numbers alternate and portray stereotypical Mexican character types, satirize public figures and use grotesque and extremely offensive humour. It is a parallel to the *género chico* which originated in Spain and participated in the revolutionary transition from liberalism to constitutionalism (Keltly 65). The *género mexicano* served as a voice of the revolution that attacked the politically, socially, and economically powerful elites. After the revolution the focus of this genre shifted and set out to accomplish the task of making audiences aware of the intrinsic value of Mexico as a culture, a society, and a country capable of production, by underlining the nation as an entity independent of foreign influences. This type of theatre was at its peak, and the artists involved made political and social commentary on every move in the public arena:

La situación política que se vivía en México a mediados de los años 20, propició lo que hasta hoy en día se conoce como la revista política, donde se satirizaban muchos personajes de la vida nacional, especialmente

funcionarios, diputados y senadores . . . Sin embargo el reinado de las comedias políticas no duró demasiado tiempo porque la censura entró en acción, ante la consolidación de los gobiernos revolucionarios; algunas compañías escénicas que también se dedicaban a este estilo teatral fueron detenidas sorpresivamente por la policía. (Zúñiga 11-12)

In the *revista mexicana* of the twenties and thirties, rural characters like the *charro*, an elegant Mexican cowboy common in farces, and characters in everyday urban life were the heroes. What made the *revista* what it was, was the inversion of roles where the ones who believed themselves intelligent were fools and the real intellectuals were the bum, the drunk, the prostitute, and the Indian (Kelty 68). This is also the hour of birth of the comic Cantinflas, a poor, urban half-drunk, who soon became the centre of the sketches. The *pelado* had made it into the *tablas* (the stage) and would speak his truth out of his own world view. Other *sketcheros* (as performers of short, independent, and usually humorous pieces are called) soon added to the entertainment of the audience, each with his personal idiosyncrasies (the most famous ones after Cantinflas: Resortes, Clavillazo, Palillo).

The next step in the development of the genre was the evolution of the *pelado* into the *pachuco*, who left his rural ignorance behind to substitute it with urban street smarts. His space of action was the nocturnal D.F., where entertainment like radio and movies, tough sports (wrestling, bullfighting, boxing), cabarets, and *la carpa* were his medium. What followed was a degeneration of the genre to the *revistas locas* that lacked cohesiveness but because of the ever increasing numbers of tents to stage them, became widespread. Tent shows were less costly and with time even commercial songs and sketches found venues in them. The invasion of the *teatro de revista* by the *carpa* was inevitable, the latter being a smaller, less

pretentious version of the first (Kelty 67). Eventually the *teatro de carpa* carved its own niche. It tackled and dealt with issues and concerns of the people with uncensored language and images. The programme was subject to daily revisions with no strict adherence to, nor reliance on scripts. About the quantity of production the critic Ceballos writes, “Hacer una bitácora crítica de los estrenos semanales de revista mexicana por más de dos décadas sería objeto para un documentado libro”, and about their success he adds,

Mientras . . . los dramaturgos “serios”, después conocidos como los Pirandellos, intentaban renovar la escena dramática con la temporada pro arte nacional, Pardavé⁸ y Soto (Roberto “el Panzón” Soto) hacían lo mismo a través del género lírico mexicano y con mejor fortuna. (37)

By the late forties and early fifties the *carpa* was on the decline. The public no longer needed to satirize the government, because the members of society were growing complacent. They preferred facile entertainment that did not challenge them to think. Lanzilotti maintains that the sketches became impotent and repressed, and this characterized the Mexican theatre of the seventies and early eighties (Kelty

⁸Mexico’s highly acclaimed multitalented artist, Joaquín Pardavé, whose father (singer) and mother (*tiple*) both had become well known in the tent show milieu, began to perform at an early age. He started in the *carpas* and the *zarzuela* and in *revistas políticas* like *México multicolor* presented in 1926, in which he played the role of the *indio Chema* who would tell the political happenings of the era in negative terms (Zúñiga 12). Pardavé became a great success in the film industry.

70). Many artists of the nomadic performing genre of the *carpa* ended up in the increasingly popular radio business later replaced by the film industry.

Nevertheless the *revista mexicana*, the *carpa* and other popular theatre forms survived, and the *género mexicano* continues to ridicule public figures and attack the centralization of all powers in Mexico City to this day. Jesusa Rodríguez is a contributor to the democratic revolution of the nineties and therefore a successor to people like Cantinflas and Palillo, who each in their respective times sharpened the political bite, always trespassing against the permissible because they counted on the support of their audiences. This did not leave them immune to censorship though. Jesús Martínez “Palillo”, one of the greatest sketcheros, still active in 1987 at the age of 74, for instance, was thrown into jail nine times for “crossing the line”, but he never could be completely silenced (Rocha 302).

Rodríguez’s production in the cabaret El Hábito resembles the most extreme satire used in the *revista mexicana*, and the *carpa* and her fierce and fearless attacks against government, Church, and mass media follow the tradition of the unnervingly comical *género mexicano*. The Mexican painter and theatre decorator Miguel Covarrubias suggests that the popular theatre artists of the thirties

stand forth as the only permanent contribution towards a Mexican theatre. However crude, vulgar and tainted with bad taste they may be, they have created a style and technique of the disconcerting mixture of the rough slapstick and fine, biting satire that is characteristic of the Mexican humor. (595-596)

He praises the “informality of these performances and the highly cultivated art of improvisation” which, lacking in other theatrical efforts, give a liveliness and

intensity nowhere else present (596). Mark Keltz for his part argues that Rodríguez, among a few others, accomplishes precisely that (71).

Rodríguez's cabaret continues in the vein of engaging and spontaneous art and exploits the entertainment sphere to build a dissidence within the structure of this type of provocative spectacle. Renowned Mexican writer and cultural critic, Carlos Monsiváis, believes that Rodríguez's cabaret "no es ni arte ni asamblea, no es inocencia ni pornografía, no es autoritarismo ni democracia. Es una etapa de caos y confusión y entusiasmo anárquico" (29). According to him her cabaret is a privileged territory that represents "la Cámara de Diputados" without legislative responsibility; a "casa de citas", brothel, with no active sex trade; a theatre without catharsis; an art without serious commitment; its humour, however, not without a price. Rodríguez revitalizes an almost forgotten genre and at the same time allows fresh air to enter into the system of representations of the Mexican theatre.

The plays that evolve out of this genre are in constant flux, and it happens that segments of one sketch appear in another in a sort of recycled mode. The message is strong, opinionated, and constantly challenges the existing status quo. The charm of the genre lies in the humorous manner in which it is presented to the audience, rendered inoffensive despite the message's conversational, serious critique of them, their society, and their institutions. Everything and everyone is at risk of being the target of the next joke. The creative space allowed to the performers by an audience hungering for plain speaking in a corrupt and undemocratic society can be utilized by parody-loving artists, whose principal talent is to find paths to say things in such a way that the politically forbidden is tolerated.

Chapter III

Jesusa Rodríguez's *teatro cabaret*

The *teatro cabaret*, as Rodríguez's work is called, is a fierce genre filled with sharp, quick repartee, which is highly political and clearly controversial. It dares to express extreme stances, attracting "a certain type of audience while driving others away" (Kelty 93). The satirist delivers a frontal attack on issues that are extremely sensitive, such as moral and religious beliefs and political and social attitudes and viewpoints. People and events are parodied, and even sarcastically ridiculed to the wild amusement or scandalized chagrin of the observers.

This type of entertainment is received particularly well in times of political controversy and crisis because it inspires hope in apparently hopeless situations.

Rodríguez herself says in her interview with Mark and Blanca Kelty:

Básicamente te diría que el trabajo del cabaret y de la sátira política son las aves de rapiña de la crisis. Para nosotros una crisis significa nuestro mejor momento. Este género teatral es un género que se necesita muchísimo en la desesperación. No sólo económica sino en la desesperación ideológica, social y política. La razón no es porque es una válvula de escape o desahogo. Todo lo contrario. Yo pienso que el arte del cabaret o de la sátira o de la farsa es un arte esencialmente precario. Cuando no tienes nada tienes que sacar de esa nada todo lo que puedas. En situación de guerra, con más razón, una tortilla dura te significa mucho. Así veo yo este teatro. En una situación de crisis, somos quien más público tiene seguramente. Entonces la crisis nos afecta porque nos beneficia. Este tipo de espectáculo, para mí, es sorprendente y además agradable saber que el teatro de cabaret es un teatro necesario en época de crisis. (123)

Her art feeds on the existing corrupt political system, on the Catholic Church as an institution of suppression, and on the monopolizing television agency of Televisa. These three giants loom above Mexican everyday life in a way that is all-pervasive. Many aspects of life are permeated by actions and non-actions, decisions, rules, and propaganda spread through the voices of politicians, religious patriarchs, and the almighty presence of television in almost every Mexican home. Rodríguez has strong views on these entities that she considers to be the primary enemies of the people and attacks them continuously and mercilessly in her weekly performances. The assumed task of the conceivers and performers of *teatro cabaret* is, in the short term, to disturb the audience's "comfort zone" with questions and to induce feelings of unease; in the long run, it seeks to sow seeds of resistance. This type of theatre elicits an enthusiastic response in Mexico, a country with a deeply imbedded anarchistic vein.

In the fragmented world of Mexico City at the turn of the new century, Rodríguez stands as a model of how a rebel dramatist operates in the present. An increasing number of critics are recognizing her as a prominent social satirist. She opposes the oligarchic tradition of the ruling classes. Involved in supporting the efforts of the Zapatistas and other revolutionaries, she is a friend of the PRD (Partido de la Revolución Democrática), because the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional) has proven to be in a fossilized state for decades and the PAN (Partido de Acción Nacional) caters to the conservative upper classes.

According to Rodríguez, art always stands against conventional morals because in its essence it is opposed to the establishment (Franco, "A Touch" 60). She believes that an artist cannot spend time thinking of social canons or rules of conventional behaviour. Rodríguez likes to compare her art of theatre-making with

the work in the kitchen as opposed to the cinema production which, as she says, takes place in the living room. The kitchen offers a more human and organic form of life, whereas the living room is set apart, more pompous and distanced (Franco, "A Touch" 55). The kitchen is the space where one concocts the elixir of life. The playwright also believes that if there is anything interesting about theatre, it is that every day it starts anew (Franco, "A Touch" 61).

For the multifaceted artist the cabaret is a *género madre*⁹ because it allows her to probe deeply into issues of daily life (Vega, "Las transmutaciones"). In her interview with Olivares the artist states that the cabaret reminds people of profound truths. She believes that it will never die because it is the mother genre, a school of experimentation and recuperation. Rodríguez uses her work as a *recordatorio* in which she asks the people not to forget the past. She considers it her task to always keep the mass memory alive lest the citizens bury events, like the massacres of Aguas Blancas¹⁰, Acteal¹¹, or Tlatelolco¹². Rodríguez is doing her part to nurture

⁹Rodríguez has a great sense of clever word play. With the term *género madre* she evokes the term *padre*, a colloquial form for "great" or "really cool", as well as the expression *a toda madre*, that describes something even "greater" than *padre*. The primary choice of the word in this case is obviously for its meaning of "origin", but used by the parodist, has to be understood with the connotations described.

¹⁰On June 28, 1995 seventeen *campesinos* belonging to the OCSS (Organización Campesina de la Sierra del Sur) were murdered in Aguas Blancas in the Sierra de Guerrero. According to Montemayor, this massacre is part of the war strategy promoted by the Mexican government to repress indigenous sublevation.

the growing awareness in the people who are trying to see beyond the stifling rhetoric of the government and the Church, and the somniferous entertainment of the mass media.

The fierce honesty of Rodríguez's satirical analysis of Mexico, explicit with no hidden agendas, is provocative and disarming. In her performances she attacks in very specific ways, using video images of her targets to supplement the live caricatures. She makes no attempt to cloak their identities by using stereotypical figures as other satirists in Mexico City do. She openly represents and talks about well-known figures of the Mexican government, the Catholic Church, and the media, highlighting fearlessly whatever comes to her sharp attention. Although Mexican authorities are known to be intolerant of satirical attacks on certain powerful individuals, Rodríguez has gone unharmed. She has been threatened by religious groups and pro-life groups, but not by the government because, as she believes, they know how stubborn and loud she is and fear scandal (Olivares). In the 1980s her adaptation of Oskar Panizza's "The Council of Love", a classical satire from 1894 set in 1485, that represents the problem of corruption in the Church, caused a terrible uproar and was going to be shut down. Rodríguez believes that the reason why the disturbance reached great proportions was that at the same time there was an

¹¹In December 1997 forty-five indigenous people were massacred in the community Acteal in the state of Chiapas. Most of the victims were women and children.

¹²The Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco was the site of the massacre of students and their supporters ordered by the president Gustavo Díaz Ordaz just prior to the Olympic Games in Mexico City in 1968.

exhibition in the *Museo de Arte Moderno* showing a painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe with the face of Marilyn Monroe. The people who censured the exhibition, right-wing Church supporters, also threatened to close down the play. When Rodríguez appealed to the Mexican Committee on Freedom of Expression, her performance received great support from the intellectual community, and the government offered security guards to make sure that the show could go on (Franco, “A Touch” 53).

The Popular Theatre Debate

Rodríguez’s choice of the content and the message of her work is “popular” in the sense of the word given to it by playwright and dramatic theorist Augusto Boal. In his discussion of popular theatre, Boal maintains that there is a fundamental difference between the *pueblo* and the *población*. “Población es la totalidad de habitantes de un país o región . . . [p]ueblo: incluye sólo a quienes alquilan su fuerza de trabajo” (*Técnicas* 21). *Pueblo* is a generic designation that includes workers, farmers, and all those who are temporarily or occasionally associated with them (students and other sectors). The rest of the population is made up of the *antipueblo* “los propietarios, los latifundistas, la burguesía y sus asociados (ejecutivos, mayordomos) y, en general, todos los que piensan como ellos” (21). This *antipueblo*, also definable as the “silent majority” is the main target of pro-government propaganda in the mass media. According to Boal there is a need for popular theatre to access the *antipueblo*. He believes that there are intrinsic similarities between the *pueblo* and most of the *antipueblo*, who think like the bourgeoisie (the theorist estimates that only 10% of the so-called bourgeoisie is actually bourgeoisie) but do not enjoy their benefits:

Los públicos llamados “burgueses” . . . incluyen también a pequeños burgueses--bancarios, estudiantes y profesores, profesionales liberales, etc.--, que, por su alienación, muchas veces aceptan la ideología burguesa, sin disfrutar las ventajas de la burguesía; piensan como burgueses pero no comen como ellos” (*Técnicas* 33).

This large sector of the population that Boal calls *personajes híbridos* are submerged in the communication media owned and controlled by the highest social strata. Therefore it is to their advantage to see a play presenting the *pueblo's* perspective, a perspective they unconsciously share, since they are actually closer to it than to the dominant class. Through the outreach to this silent majority, the individuals forming it are given the chance to transform and broaden their social philosophy. Boal goes so far as to consider it a crime to withhold the information that is there from the ideologically bombarded *antipueblo*, who, only by breaking out of the given parameters, will be able to evaluate the rhetoric in which it is immersed.

To Boal the determining factor for defining a spectacle is its perspective, not its audience. In his view any theatrical event becomes *popular*

en cuanto asume la perspectiva del pueblo en el análisis del microcosmos social que en él aparece, aunque se dé para un solo espectador, aunque se trate de un ensayo ante una sala vacía, y aunque su destinatario no sea el pueblo. La presencia del pueblo no determina necesariamente el carácter popular del espectáculo; muchas veces el pueblo está presente como víctima del hecho teatral (33).

Popular theatre, then, does not have to be performed in the streets. Boal defends popular theatre presented to the wider public, e.g., the middle- and upper-class theatregoers, as being necessary and crucial for the struggle against

oppressive governments and socioeconomic systems because it has the power to enlarge people's horizons. For this Brazilian theorist there are three types of popular theatre: popular theatre for popular audiences, popular theatre for non-popular audiences, and anti-popular theatre for popular audiences. Rodríguez's theatre is part of the second category, which allows her to be considered a writer and performer of popular theatre regardless of the space that she chooses to work in. Although more recently she has been incorporating also the first category into her scope, her work in *El Hábito* or *La Capilla* situates her as a political activist catering to an audience that does not see itself as belonging to the *pueblo*, the lower classes from the streets.

The New Popular Theatre emerged between the mid-60s and the 80s. The first groups like CLETA (Centro Libre de Experimentación Teatral y Artística) in Mexico, La Candelaria (Colombia), Teatro Arena (Brazil), and others became models for hundreds of new groups through seminars, workshops, tours, and festivals. They all constituted a network of pioneers of the "Nuevo teatro", whose one common denominator was the adoption of Brechtian ideas, to which they all had been exposed in some form or another (Weiss 153). German theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht had revolutionized the stage.¹³ According to Weiss, however, the

¹³Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) introduced fundamental changes to drama. His theatre separates from the traditional dramatic theatre when it becomes a narrative, when the character exists side by side with the actor, his body viewed as a social text rather than as an individual. The spectator is turned into an observer, who stands outside and studies rather than shares the experience; this arouses his capacity for action and forces him to take decisions. In Brechtian theatre, the human being is

knowledge of Brecht was secondary to the rediscovery of the groups' own roots through traditional popular culture and theatrical traditions of their own societies (153).

To some Mexican political theatre activists, particularly the members of popular theatre groups like CLETA, Rodríguez does not produce popular theatre for the simple reason that, as she charges a price of admission to view her shows, her art is inaccessible to popular audiences. The locale of performance drastically limits the type of audience she can reach, and thus the restricted traditional view of popular theatre performed for and by the *pueblo* is not met. It is difficult to measure the effectiveness of a street performance (where everyone can become audience, but can also just walk away or be distracted, by noise, passersby, and simultaneous happenings of real life), and the effectiveness of a closed performance which the audience intentionally attends. Paying individuals gathered inside a building to purposefully follow the creative act are not easily going to give up on the planned evening of entertainment and their attention will be undivided.

Regardless of critical classification, however, Rodríguez's efforts are being seen by increasingly diverse audiences. As of 22 June 2000, Rodríguez had

the object of inquiry. Rejecting the traditional view that the human condition is unalterable and therefore to be taken for granted, Brecht adopts the premise that because reason can dominate feeling, the human being is alterable and able to alter her/himself (Dukore 847).

rehearsed *El fuego*, a modernized version of Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, and possibly set out on the beginning of another facet in her work because with *El fuego* she enters the street performance world. The newly renovated Fábrica de Artes y Oficios de Oriente (FARO) was inaugurated on June 28 with this performance under the auspice of the present governor of Mexico City, Rosario Robles. The FARO will be a place reserved to one creator at a time who, in company with youths and adults of Iztapalapa, a low-income neighbourhood at the edges of the megacity, will construct *quimeras*, whatever artistic spectacles he or she may invent. The whole building is conceived as a big ship, where the artist in residence will navigate with the help of his or her crew for around three months at a time. Its purpose is not solely the presentation of theatre, but of all types of art, be it sculpture, music, poetry, or any other form.

The idea of Rodríguez's *El fuego* started three years ago, when the artist decided to perform Aeschylus's *Prometheus* in a manner accessible to contemporary audiences. To set up her project, Rodríguez went searching for the right space because her theatre, La Capilla, would have been inadequate to accommodate the nearly 80 characters. She had already discarded the possibility of talking with Rafael Tovar, president of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CNCA). Sometime earlier Tovar had called the famous director and artist to ask her opinion on the remodeling of the Unidad Artística y Cultural del Bosque. Rodríguez considered that the locale should not lose its popular character and asked the president to open up that space as an *ensayódromo* where the youth from popular neighbourhoods would be able to express themselves. Tovar definitely did not share Rodríguez's inclusivist view and solely with the economic aspect in mind talked about rentability, admitting that in his view erudite art like opera is an art exclusively

for elites. This opinion was enough for Rodríguez to recognize that she and the president for the arts are worlds apart. As private initiatives do not support her theatre, because “empresarios son muy ignorantes” (Olivares), the artist finally turned to Rosario Robles, who at that precise time had the proposal for the creation of the FARO on her desk as part of an initiative to decentralize the cultural offering of the D.F. Rodríguez says about this coincidence: “Se juntaron el hambre y las ganas de comer” (Olivares). The FARO would be the ideal space for Rodríguez’s project.

The production of the play has meant much to the artist. She is amazed, she remarks to the journalist Olivares, at the input and energy of the young people of the surrounding areas that are taking care of scenography, costuming, masks, and characters, so innovative that they will surprise the audience, because they are not contaminated by the inertia that has invaded many actors who call themselves professional. She is truly proud of these youngsters, who have renewed her spirit: “Son cuates¹⁴ que de verdad tienen una realidad cabrona y están decididos a trabajar . . . La cultura se está dando ahí, en los barrios . . .” (Olivares). She affirms that since she has been working in places like Santo Domingo (with La Chinga) and presently Iztapalapa, she has recovered “el ánimo que había perdido, de vivir en México” (Olivares). This play will also be presented in La Mina de la Luz de San Luis Potosí, an old silver mine into which the audience will be taken by locomotive, as part of the artistic activities of the Festival del Desierto in San Luis Potosí.

¹⁴*Cuates*, literally “twins”, is a term colloquially used for “guys” and good friends.

While Rodríguez is committed to promoting an all-inclusive experience, she is not uncritical of the street-performance milieu:

La gente en la calle, a veces no logra entrar en el asunto porque están acostumbrados a la idiotez que les da Televisa o Televisión Azteca. Les cuesta trabajo un espectáculo que les está haciendo pensar en su realidad o divertirse de sus tragedias. (L.H. González)

Nevertheless, although recognizing the problems inherent in this venue, she explains why she has entered it: “Era importante hacer un teatro incluyente, porque si estamos hablando de una realidad excluyente que nos reprime, pues hay que ser congruentes” (L.H. González). Furthermore, she wants to include the whole community, particularly that sector which has no money to purchase a theatre ticket.

Rodríguez is neither the typical street performer nor the commercial theatre actress. She defends both her venues, the indoor as well as the outdoor one, and she intends to keep *El Hábito* as a working space as well as take her company to the streets. In *El Hábito*, as Keltly states, “Rodríguez’s group stands out in Mexico City because it employs a popular perspective but targets a non-popular audience” (77). Here she provides a space that attempts to bridge two worlds deeply split economically and in which she offers an immensely needed pathway of understanding between the different classes in Mexico. In her own locale, Rodríguez makes theatre for an audience who cares to hear a popular message. Her audience can sense their displacement from the power structure, an experience comparable to the *pueblo’s* alienation from the means of production. Rodríguez therefore contributes an entirely different, nevertheless important facet to the whole movement of the struggle for social change in Mexico. Her entrance into the bigger and open stages is a confirmation of her popular strain.

Through her activism Rodríguez sends out the message that social change is possible and necessary to create a healthier social, cultural, and economic climate in Mexico. She challenges her non-popular audiences to face their complicity with the status quo, disturbing, under scandalous humour, their complacent stance of non-action. No one attending her performances is allowed to stand by innocently; she concentrates on implying the complicity of all in the social construction of Mexican reality. She also tempts her audience to recognize both sides within oneself: the victim and the oppressor (Kelty 96). By immersing the spectators in laughter, she forces them to think, because they will realize without directly being conscious of it, that they stand on both sides of the fence sharing, as previously mentioned, an ideology of the wealthy but living with a declining economic status. Thus Rodríguez attracts a population that is susceptible to her messages of the urgency of the need for change. The people who come to her performances do so to hear and enjoy what elsewhere in Mexico may never be mentioned publicly. The silent majority that Rodríguez targets can discover through her art their shared feelings with the *pueblo*, and the deep gap that separates them from the very wealthy. Because everyone is part of the acute social drama in Mexico today--the ongoing crisis spreading into all sectors except into the top of the social pyramid--, the controversial playwright has the opportunity to raise awareness. Rodríguez also has the talent to force at least the receptive ones in her audience to reexamine their role in society, and she believes in transformation that occurs subtly and gradually.

Rodríguez gives the lie to institutionalized truths in order to provoke the discovery and definition of what is real for the people. She embraces the chaotic state of affairs to make possible a re-vision and, as Kelty puts it: "As a postmodern revolutionary, Rodríguez imbues her audience with the power of antistructural

change and prepares them to re-define and re-identify their position in Mexican society at the brink of the twenty-first century” (228). To accomplish this, she scrutinizes the myths of Mexico that empower national and cultural practices in religion, politics, and the media.

Rodríguez never works in a conventional, linear style. She alters and refocuses in a constant search for new meaning and renders a complex theatrical and dramatic style. She constructs non-linear scripts characterized by fragmentation and pluralistic foci. She puzzles her audience and piques their curiosity with complex, incomplete or isolated messages which make her a master of puzzling parody (Kelty 33). The genre of parody gives her the tools to distort the Mexican reality, and that is what her spectators come to see: the manipulation and distortion that produce a new perspective on things widely known, the demythification of their daily experiences, and the reformulation of what they think they know about Mexican history and tradition.

Rodríguez considers humour the main ingredient of her art. She states: “El centro de mi vida, de mi trabajo, es el humor. La música y la risa es lo único que como género humano aún nos sostiene; porque hay un encono por destruir la inteligencia, pero no se puede destruir ni la música ni la risa” (Alzate, “Jesusa” 83). She believes that music is a *lingua franca* and she wants to give back to it the space taken away from it by language. She thinks that the experience of humour, similarly to music, also reaches far beyond the spoken word and therefore is a vital expression of theatre and of human existence. Her ingenious talent at word play added to her love for humour produce a show that is easily absorbed by her audience. The Mexican art of self-ridicule and the ability to turn over every word to give it a second, even a third meaning is part of her repertoire that makes the experience very

palatable. The digestion of the things she serves, however, might very well take a while or at times even cause some difficulties.

Rodríguez is an expert on becoming the character she is representing. She has an extraordinary capacity to lend her body and her “other soul” (*el alma del hígado*, as the old Mexicans used to say) to the people she is representing (as varied as the Devil, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Monica Lewinsky, Carlos Salinas, and Pedro Infante, to name just a few). She argues that what she does is go to the *alma del hígado* to appropriate the essence of her character with great precision. Then she bites off a piece of the essence of the character and lets that piece grow inside of her until it becomes independent of the person that we know as Jesusa (Vega “Las transmutaciones”).

The following chapters will illustrate how she impersonates three mythical figures of Mexican culture. Rodríguez will lend her body and her other soul to Coatlicue, La Malinche, and Sor Juana, in an attempt to publicly convey her interpretation of the story and the connections that she sees with the present times.

Chapter IV

La gira mamal de la Coatlicue

La gira mamal de la Coatlicue is a sketch conceived around the papal visit to Mexico in 1990. Coatlicue¹⁵ is the Mesoamerican earth-mother goddess who gave birth to 400 sons and to the night goddess Coyolxauhqui¹⁶ after being impregnated by an obsidian blade. According to the legend borrowed from the Toltecs, the priestess and mother Coatlicue was sweeping out her temple one day when she discovered a ball of down which she placed in the bosom of her dress for safekeeping. When she had finished sweeping, the down was gone and she was miraculously pregnant again, this time with the war and sun god Huitzilopochtli.¹⁷

¹⁵Coatlicue translates as: “She of the Serpent Skirt”. Other names for her are Teteoinnan (Mother of the Gods) and Toci (Our Grandmother). The earth-mother goddess also appears as Cihuacóatl (Snake Woman) and Tonantzin (Mother), goddess of childbirth, and as Tlazoltéotl, goddess of impurity (Jackson 104-105).

¹⁶Modern scholarship holds that the 400 sons are the 400 stars and Coyolxauhqui is the moon. Their defeat by their half-brother Huitzilopochtli signified day’s victory over night. The disc-shaped idol of the Goddess of the Moon, Coyolxauhqui, was discovered in 1977 in the Templo Mayor in Mexico.

¹⁷Huitzilopochtli, god of the sun and war, was born fully clothed in blue armor with hummingbird feathers decorating his head (thus his name “Hummingbird Magician”). Huitzilopochtli is the god who in 1325 led the Aztecs and their priest Tenoch to their final destination of Tenochtitlán, the oldest city alive in the Americas today. There he became the patron god of the Aztecs, who

Believing themselves disgraced, since a goddess was to give birth only once (Fuentes 109), Coatlicue's firstborn children all joined together to kill their mother. As she died, Huitzilopochtli, the result of the miraculous conception, swore vengeance. Appearing fully armed, he chased off the 400 sons and cut off Coyolxauhqui's head¹⁸ (Versényi 7).

Coatlicue is the symbol of the origin of the native people. When Quetzalcoatl¹⁹ is leaving the city to die, he sings a song to Coatlicue: "She will nurse me no more, / She, my mother, an ya'! / She of the Serpent Skirt, / Ah, the holy one! / I, her child, alas, / Am weeping, iya'ye an'!" (Jackson 105). As ancestral mother of all, Coatlicue is also mother of Malintzin, who herself is considered Mother and ancestor of all Mexican generations to come. Although there has been a rediscovery of Mexico's indigenous heritage with an accompanying emphasis upon it, Coatlicue has not yet been as honoured as the male gods and other mythical beings. It is exactly in this respect that Rodríguez penetrates into the depths of Mexican culture to fill the existing vacuum.

sacrificed prisoners taken in battle to him.

¹⁸After decapitating Coyolxauhqui, Huitzilopochtli threw her into a deep gorge where the body lies mutilated forever. This myth reveals how the natural universe of the Indians emerged out of catastrophe (Fuentes 110).

¹⁹Quetzalcoatl (Plumed Serpent) is the major deity of Mesoamerican civilizations. He is the wind god, the transformer of inert matter into life. When the Spanish conquerors arrived, the word spread that Quetzalcoatl had returned, which gave rise to the ominous mistake that would eventually lead to the Aztecs' downfall.

Rodríguez states that there exists a widespread fear of searching beyond a certain point in Mexican history, the point marked by the Spanish conquest. Themes that involve the Aztec Empire at its end, the encounter of both worlds, and the subsequent events are common patrimony, but what preceded the 1492 encounter is taboo. Rodríguez says:

Mesoamerican civilization exists but nobody touches it. It is like the exterminating angel. It is there and nobody deals with it because it is like a taboo; something prevents us from dealing with it. We can discuss the conquest . . . but going further back is seen as too much of a challenge and seems impossible. (Franco, "A Touch" 53)

Rodríguez believes that the path to discovery of the Mesoamerican civilization is rarely pursued because of the fear of following it to the end. The challenge to take on such material is enormous, a point emphasized also by Mexican writer Carlos Fuentes who believes that when facing the times of origin, human beings inevitably feel possessed by chaos, power, and terror, particularly when looking at the pantheon of Aztec divinities (109). Things indigenous have been so repressed in the Mexican consciousness that they are untouchable, sacred, and utterly solemn. They are nonetheless the Mexican roots sequestered in books and museums. Rodríguez wants to approach Mesoamerican aesthetics rather freely and fearlessly and cut through the mist of prohibition to bring them close to the people. Focusing on the earth-goddess she says: "It is strange because Coatlicue is always on the entrance tickets to the museum, photographed in journals all over the place, but never becomes part of daily life. It is something that is already very distant from us" (Franco, "A Touch" 57). Rodríguez's intention is to go beyond the static perception of the goddess's

image resulting from archeological and didactic exploration. Fuentes mentions this detached perspective in his book *El espejo enterrado*:

la escultura de Coyolxauhqui y la de su madre Coatlicue son formas artísticas que, aunque nacidas de un mito, ya no cumplen una función religiosa. Se han convertido en parte de la imaginación artística, de tal manera que, más allá de sus orígenes sagrados, lo que hoy vemos es una composición artística moderna y ambivalente. (110)

Rodríguez wants her audience to recognize precisely that distanced attitude when she lets her Coatlicue speak about forgetfulness and abandonment by her own children. It is not the cult of an old deity that is key here, but the negation of Mexico's own roots that she stresses and brings into awareness.

Within the context of the debate concerning the importance of performance space to the categorization of a dramatic work as popular or not, it is noteworthy that *La gira mamal de la Coatlicue* was first staged during a festival in the Auditorio Nacional in front of a huge non-paying audience. The response was overwhelming. The actress remembers:

What struck me right from the start was that the public watched it seriously but only gradually began to warm up, and at the end they were shouting . . . That is why I want very much to deal with this Mesoamerican world without being too solemn about it and without those attitudes that all this is sacred, all is untouchable. I would like to see the humorous side of the forms, and the texts that are very funny--the playfulness, the sound of Nahuatl, which is so liquid, and things of this kind. (Franco, "A Touch" 58)

Rodríguez's Coatlicue strikes her creator as "a Mexican mother whose children have gone away. Nobody is left and she doesn't know what to do in the house" (Franco,

“A Touch” 58). The playwright attaches this difficult situation in a woman’s life to the mythology of Coatlicue and has the story converge with the appearance of the Pope on Mexican soil.

The visit of Pope John Paul II to Mexico took place in May of 1990. His reception by the people was, as expected for a religious country like Mexico, spectacular in the full theatrical sense. The power of the Catholic Church, the exorbitant expense incurred by a country where millions go hungry every day, the deep belief and devotion of the people, and the behaviour of the advantage-seeking politicians throughout the whole spectacle were all issues laid bare before everyone’s eyes. The silent majority presented an extraordinary picture of worship, but the protest of the not-so-silent few was also there. In the letter *Carta al Papa* published on May 10, Mexico’s highly celebrated Mother’s Day, a group of women addressed John Paul II and demanded answers to deeply disturbing questions like the prohibition of contraceptives and the exclusion of women from the higher ranks of the Catholic Church. After stating their deep faith and hope, the women made the following five statements: 1) It is necessary to create new ecclesiastical structures that permit equality among men and women; 2) Jesus in his humanity is a historic man; the women who went with him are his disciples and were apostles as well; 3) Women have a multitude of gifts and vocations, of which maternity is not the only one, and as such the bearing of children should be free and voluntary; 4) It is time that as a church we acknowledge that sexuality is sacred and divine; and finally, 5) It is time to create and enjoy a new ethic and a new morality in freedom and pluralism (de Barbieri 358-361). Furthermore, the undersigners adamantly stated “Ya es hora de romper con una moral autoritaria, condenatoria, de culpas, de normas absolutas,

que está aislada de los contextos humanos y de la historia; que permanentemente nos está mirando como menores de edad, y no como personas adultas” (361).

Thanks to Rodríguez’s *Coatlicue*, another aspect of the domination of Catholicism in Mexico was brought to public attention, a worthwhile, cleverly staged aspect, which will have struck many a favourable cord in the growing search for disident focus.

The title of the sketch *La gira mamal de la Coatlicue* is a successful play on the word *papal*, and given the loaded connotation for Mexicans of everything with the word *madre/mamá* in it, this pun touches everyone’s lightheartedness.²⁰ It leaves no doubt about what will be the centre target of the sketch (the *gira papal*). For this one-woman sketch Rodríguez wears a big, square, metal costume with snakes dangling all around her. She built it taking as a model the Coatlicue goddess in the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City. This faceless, bulky stone idol from the fifteenth century, standing over two and a half meters tall, prototype of conflict and duality integrated in one, wears, as her name indicates, a skirt of serpents and is decorated with skulls and lacerated hands and hearts. The two snakes she has for a head are facing each other and their tongues become one; for feet she has jaguar claws. Fuentes describes her as “Cuadrada, decapitada, sin ataduras antropomórficas, Coatlicue ha sido creada a imagen y semejanza de lo desconocido

²⁰*Mamal* immediately brings to mind the verb *mamar* and a whole array of colloquial expressions that are formed with that verb, such as *no mames* or “don’t suck”, and *es un mamón* which is said of someone who does not cooperate, or is either “chicken” or snobbish. It has the connotation of hanging onto the mother’s breast for too long.

. . . no admite fisuras en su cuerpo. Ella es el monolito perfecto, la totalidad de lo intenso y de lo autocontenido” (109), a goddess not made in the image and likeness of man, both awe-inspiring and terrifying.

In Rodríguez’s performance Coatlicue speaks directly to her audience, whom she addresses as her children. She opens her act with outrageous irony: “Mexicanos, especie a la que sólo 80 millones de personas separan de la extinción, oídme . . .” (401), and from there on she mixes serious information about past and present with humorous remarks, reminds everyone whom she symbolizes, and accuses her children of having completely forgotten about her in the *Sala Mexica* of the museum. Rodríguez’s Coatlicue is facetious and playful, however she does not lack precision and strength as she scolds her children in a motherly way: “Yo soy Coatlicue, la Diosa de la que brotan civilizaciones y museos, fuente de hermosura en la que se concentran los benditos horrores del universo” (401). She is a mystery and a dark figure out of which spring beauty as well as horror because she is the ancestral earth-mother of all. “Coatlicue, el verdadero inconsciente de la raza, ¡La Emperatriz de la tarjeta postal!” (401), she exclaims, juxtaposing the profundity of her presence inside her people with the superficiality of the treatment she gets in modern times. She is beginning and end, unity in diversity, the origin of life and death, “la madre del universo y de todo aquel que se jacte de tenerla y de no tenerla” (401). With these words she alludes to the deeply insulting popular expression *no tiene madre*.²¹ After this introduction, Coatlicue confides to her children “sin distinción de ingresos” (401), regardless of their economic status, that she has had

²¹*No tiene madre* basically says that the “motherless” person is despicable and absolutely worthless.

enough. There have been the invaders with their religions, the tax collecting priests, and the conquerors armed with televisions. She feels neglected by the civil servants, who have failed to pass on knowledge to the children: “no llevan a los niños de primaria a cantarme Las Mañanitas”, and humiliated by the parade of iniquitous people who regard her only as a tourist attraction (401).²² She has tolerated the intolerable and watched her temples being destroyed by the barbarians who did not know what they were doing, and could not understand the “estética vanguardista” (401). The words of Jesus Christ, “Forgive them, Father, for they know not what they do”, come to mind when Coatlicue is understanding of the barbarians’ ignorance. As to the avant-garde aesthetics of pre-Columbian art, Fuentes has drawn attention to its similarities with modern art. Its ambiguous composition has been compared before when the French poet and writer, André Breton, saw in Mexican art and life an expression of Surrealism, and the British sculptor, Henry Moore, was inspired by the statue of the Chac Mool²³ for his series of reclining figures (110).

Rodríguez’s Coatlicue states that she endured the destruction of her followers because she is aware that a religion without trials becomes institutionalized, which is why the now dominant religion is incontestable. She has been prudent and remained in such a complete silence that she even witnessed the assault on the Museo Nacional de Antropología²⁴ on December 24, 1985, while the world, out of

²²“Las Mañanitas” is the traditional Mexican birthday song.

²³Chac Mool is a Maya-Toltec rain divinity, represented by a recumbent figure with the head upright and turned sideways, and the hands placed on the belly.

²⁴The assault on the Museo Nacional de Antropología,

ignorance, celebrated the birth of Jesus, who the goddess refers to as a rival child. Coatlicue saw everything with her innumerable eyes. While the ancient objects were being stolen, she was convinced that finally she was going to be taken away, and her many hearts and many serpents, and her own and petrified mass were beating with emotion as she closed her eyes. She desired to be the object of interest, even if it meant that she would end up as a goddess in a closet. “Supuse que vendrían por mí, sí, ese homenaje de un transporte especial me lo deben rendir . . . ¡a mí la ofrenda de la grúa! ¡a mí el tributo del sudor y la fatiga de la cuadrilla de cien hombres!” (402). Rodríguez’s Coatlicue is making an allusion to the Pope’s armoured car that was constructed for his public appearances and is shipped to wherever he goes on his journeys. Using her anachronistic sense of humour, Rodríguez exaggerates the image to fit the implication by observing that to move her it would take a tow-truck. But all prayers and wishes were in vain, Coatlicue says sorrowfully, because when she opened her eyes, the thieves were gone. She is still angry and humiliated by the robbers’ ignorance, and she admits her own shortcomings, when she says: “¡Imbéciles, estoy en contra de los robos, pero estoy más en contra de los ladrones que no jerarquizan! ¡Bastardos! Ni respetan el patrimonio de los pueblos, ni el hit parade de la estética” (402). The double-meaning of the entire reference to the break-in is blatant. The actress is picking up on the rumours and accusations that

known in Mexico as “el robo del siglo”, happened while people were celebrating Christmas Eve. The thieves were knowledgeable and well prepared since they stole 140 of the most valuable archeological pieces made of jade and gold, leaving others of lesser value behind. The case remains unresolved to this day (Valdiosera).

were mumbled and spread by the press when the robbery happened. It was said that it was a well-orchestrated undertaking by high government officials. Rodríguez's Coatlicue exclaims: "¡ah codicia, tú tienes nombre de funcionario!" (401-02), commenting on the general corruption of Mexican officials. She surrenders to the idea of being handed to the FMI (Fondo Monetario Internacional, the biggest creditor of Mexico). When the thieves return one more time, however, they only grab "la bombonera de obsidiana que, pues sí, es un objeto mono, pero ¡mira que despreciarme a mí!" (402), a shrewd remark because it uses the adjective *mono*, "cute", which as a noun means "monkey". The candy jar has indeed the shape of a monkey and by choosing this artifact Rodríguez makes an overt allusion to the president Carlos Salinas de Gortari (in office from 1988 to 1994), who received this insolent nickname when the people, disgruntled at his policies of privatization, had chosen his looks, small body size, and protruding ears to make fun of him. The alluded obsidian candy jar was indeed the most precious object stolen during that infamous robbery.

The offense to her dignity notwithstanding, Rodríguez's Coatlicue remained as imperturbable as a rock, but now the moment has come when she is forced to defend herself because apparently her own children have lost respect: "¡Oiganme bien, mexicanos, mexiquenses²⁵, mejicones²⁶, mejidatarios²⁷ y extranjenses!: Yo

²⁵The use of the word *mexiquense* instead of *mexicano* is subtly making its way into the vocabulary. It is unclear if this neologism started out as a combination of the words *mexicano* and *estadounidense*, in which case it could be a mockery of the americanization of the Mexican. Journalists are using it without that connotation, simply as a second possibility. Rodríguez uses the same ending *-ense* to

soy el origen del origen, y a nadie se le ha ocurrido irme a recibir al aeropuerto” (402). The goddess has emerged from her sterile locale because she is hurt at the attention and reception her children have given to the Pope. In her monologue she does not mention him directly, but at this point it becomes clear that the entire sketch is an allusion to the misdirected devotion of her people.

A diferencia de otros ídolos, nunca se me han hecho imprimir 500.000 carteles, . . . nunca he hecho una gira, ya no se diga a Chalco, ni siquiera a Chapultepec, a Tlatelolco, nunca he realizado ese hermoso sueño de realizar una gira mamal con carácter puramente evangelizador . . . (402)

She has received no attention and she details what her people do for the foreign icon: invent machinery to facilitate the kissing of the soil, provide a special vehicle, etc. She laments their attention to all the luxury and excess imaginable, when what is so needed is an ecological religion, which is what she, the earth-mother, represents.

But, she says to her ungrateful children, regardless of their unconsciousness she will never abandon them, as others have done. She will always be their mother, because she loves them unconditionally, “a diferencia de otros yo los sigo queriendo porque una madre nunca olvida” (402). Whether they are misled to rub the Buddha’s

play with the original word *extranjero*.

²⁶The neologism *mejicones* evokes the pejorative term used for homosexuals, *maricones*.

²⁷The neologism *mejidatarios*, is a combination of *mexicano* and *ejidatario*, a term that describes the farmer of an *ejido*, a parcel of land cultivated by a group of people. One of the outcomes of the Revolution was the subdivision of huge acreages owned by one person, *latifundios*, into *ejidos*.

belly, or to follow a guru, or spend their paycheque buying little medals and rosaries, or go all day long “de La Ceca a La Meca”, from one end to the other, they will always be her children “porque madre sólo hay una” and that is undoubtedly she (402).

To end her warning she invokes the presence of the other gods, “que si bien se hallan devaluados teológicamente, van muy al alza en el mercado del arte” (402), hinting at the commercialization of Mexican culture. She summons Huitzilopochtli, Coyolchauqui, Chalchiutlicue²⁸ and Tezcatlipoca²⁹ and invites all the people Tlatelolca, Xochimilca, Iztapalapo, Oaxtepeco and Tlaxcalteca, and even the “Católico”, to unite and start a National Crusade to recover their origins. Coatlicue, who represents inclusivity, asks everyone to unite, friends and enemies alike. As she had stated previously, a religion that cannot tolerate criticism becomes institutionalized, which is a comment on the governing party PRI, which did not

²⁸Chalchiutlicue, “she who wears a jade skirt” is the Aztec goddess of rivers, lakes, and other freshwater bodies. She is the sister-wife of the rain god Tlaloc.

²⁹Tezcatlipoca is a creator and first-era sky god associated with the constellation of the Great Bear. He is often depicted as a jaguar. During the first world (the present one being the fifth), Tezcatlipoca reigns, followed by Quetzalcoatl, Tlaloc, and Huitzilopochtli. According to one myth regarding the demise of the golden age of the Toltec, Tezcatlipoca ousts the great and virtuous Quetzalcoatl from the temple at Tula by first inducing him with magic to stoop to debauchery and drunkenness. The practice of human sacrifice is introduced under Tezcatlipoca.

allow any real opposition until recently, when it had no other choice because the indigenous upheaval of the Zapatistas in Chiapas has attracted attention worldwide. Therefore the goddess of origin also invites the *tlaxcaltecas*, the traitors among the Indians, who joined forces with the Spanish conquerors at the decisive final battle that completely defeated the Aztec empire. She even calls on the Catholics, the religious denomination of the great majority of Mexicans, practicing and non-practicing, and therefore of her audience, forgiving them although it is their forefathers who substituted her and took away her power. She wants all Mexicans, regardless of their present belief system to reconcile with their past and acknowledge their unifying, autochthonous culture.

At last she demands that the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes define once and for all “si el Quinto Centenario, es quinto, o es centenario” (403), ridiculing the quincennial anniversary of the arrival of the colonizers by playing with the meaning of the name given to the event, and the names of Mexican coins, the *quinto* (five cents), which is the smallest one, and the *centenario*, worth one hundred pesos in gold, therefore at the opposite side of the scale and a collector’s item.

The ending lines of the monologue are powerful because they are a well-conceived rhyme that resonates like an acclamation, a *porra* (group of people who cheer and loudly praise the performance of a star, whether a politician, an athlete, or other personality) of encouragement, which will stick in the listeners’ minds long after they have left the theatre: “¡Se ve, se siente, Coatlicue está presente! ¡Se ve, se siente, Coatlicue es diferente!” (403). This *porra* derives from the presidential campaigns, when the elected president is acclaimed and greeted as he takes office.

To put Coatlicue side by side with the Pope, considered by millions the ultimate moral authority, the representative of God on earth and head of the Church established by Jesus, is daring. Rodríguez presents a Coatlicue who is down-to-earth and very vocal. She does not hide her sense of slight caused by the utmost neglect of her children, and she incites them to think about their ancient origins. Coatlicue and John Paul II symbolize the epitome of both main cultures presently alive in Mexico. Catholicism is unequivocally the dominant religion; nevertheless it started out by imposition and was only able to survive by force. It never eradicated the old belief system completely. The indigenous population, however threatened and denigrated, managed to syncretize their world view with the new religion in a way that still exists to this day. Rodríguez pulls the dusty memory out of the imposed forgetfulness in an effort to revitalize an integral part of the Mexican psyche.

The last confrontation of the two above-mentioned mythical figures, however hidden and shamed the one, and televised and venerated the other, is the confrontation of the male versus the female. Rodríguez did not select a male figure from the Aztec pantheon to protest her outrage; she deliberately chose the earth-mother of all future deities. The choice obviously has to do with the cunning word play between the invented *mamal* and the orthodox *papal*, but its implications are especially forceful in an age when patriarchy as we know it is at an end. The blatant parody of the holy figure of Rome, symbol of a patriarchal world view, is extreme and does cause mixed responses. Its success lies in the fact that Jesusa, alias Coatlicue, does not spare herself. She conveniently adds some light-hearted jokes that have little political meaning, but catch the crowd's imagination and make her look fallible and human, like the comment on how she was refused a patent on a transformer, the hugely popular American toy that is like a block before

transforming into its various shapes, just like the stone Coatlicue is massive and compact. Coatlicue also shows her shadow side, the weakness in her character, which makes her so much more understandable than the infallible Christian God. She admits that she wanted to be taken away the night of the theft in the museum. Even though in principle she condemns robbery, she shows human emotion when she voices her disappointment as she is left behind. Rodríguez's Coatlicue has feelings and is not afraid to expose them. By ridiculing all entities of the sketch, a subversive critique of government and Church are enabled, that otherwise would have been too direct and offensive, perhaps even dangerous.

The goddess Coatlicue also has a short appearance in the cabaret performance *Cielo de abajo*, "a brilliant two-woman, one skeleton 'prehispanic cabaret'" ("High Aztec" 142), according to Taylor. In this piece that relies mostly on visual effects and very little on text, Coatlicue appears all of a sudden out of the dark on top of a pyramid and begins to relate the history of her people from the origins to the present. The play is loosely based on a prehispanic conception of the afterlife of mortal souls and their trajectory through the nine levels of the prehispanic underworlds. Taylor describes it as "extraordinarily beautiful and technically demanding" ("High Aztec" 143). The goddess Coatlicue, terrifying both for her inhuman aspect and, in this case, for her departure from conventional notions of motherliness, demonstrates the duality of the indigenous belief system, where good and evil are not two possible paradigms, but are inextricably intertwined and present in all aspects of life. This Coatlicue talks about mothering and makes it clear that it is not easy to be a woman, let alone a mother. While she is speaking about sacrifice day and night and no appreciation, she gives birth to baby Jesusa on stage, an admirable artistic coup that takes advantage of the coincidental fact that

Rodríguez's first name is Jesusa. An additional point is made by turning the birth of Jesus into a down-to-earth birth of female Jesusa, daughter of the traditional goddess, rather than a boy child born in a foreign culture. This birth is, according to Taylor, a symbol of reconstitution and resolution, "a coming together of that which was previously falling apart. Instead of nothingness, the women celebrate connectedness . . . [and] continuity replaces discontinuity" ("High Aztec" 148). Woman gives birth to woman in the Aztec underworld, thereby suggesting the perseverance of the indigenous culture throughout time.

As Rodríguez's Coatlicue affirms to her audience, she is the origin of origins, the ancestral earth-mother goddess. Her offspring are the indigenous people and therefore also the Mexicans, whose symbolic mother is Malintzin. This woman, born into a period of devastating changes is the protagonist of Rodríguez's next sketch on female Mexican icons.

Chapter V

La Malinche en: Dios T.V.

The sketch *La Malinche en: Dios T.V.* features the controversial figure of Cortés's translator and mistress--variously referred to as Malintzin, Malinalli, Doña Marina, and La Malinche--who, as the metaphoric mother of the Spanish-Indian amalgamation, stands simultaneously as the symbol of tragedy and of new beginnings. Malintzin's intelligence as a translator and tactician has been rediscovered, in particular by the texts of Mexican/Chicana women who have challenged the patriarchal image that previous texts inserted into the historical discourse.

The figure of Malintzin has long formed part of the literary tradition of Mexico, which runs the gamut from demonization by old patriarchal views and, more recently, glorification by the American Chicana movement. The common element in such polarized views is that she stirs up deep feelings in every Mexican and those of Mexican origin. Accused of being the worst traitor of her own race, even the culprit of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire, she is more recently and after detailed revision and thorough study, being seen as a very different figure. For some she is the heroine of the new female identity and an icon of feminist power.

For Mexican playwrights such as Sabina Berman and Rosario Castellanos³⁰ La Malinche does not appear in her patriarchal role as the submissive woman in love with Cortés. In Berman's play *Aguila o sol* (1984)

³⁰Rosario Castellanos wrote about La Malinche and other female Mexican icons in her drama *El eterno femenino* from 1975.

she seems to be the only one who understands all that is happening and can function in both the Indian world and the Spanish one. Berman dramatizes the acculturation of La Malinche not with the negative connotation of *malinchismo*³¹, of selling out to the foreigner, but in resonance with the view of some Chicana writers, as an indication of her empathy, intelligence, and revolutionary spirit (Cypess, "From Colonial" 503). She is not the traitor of her people, as has always been suggested by the punishing attitude of the official rhetoric. The new revisionist stance observes that, first of all, the imperative of loyalty and respect to the Indian chiefs at the time is questionable. According to Berman's interpretation, it is Moctezuma who acts in the manner traditionally associated with La Malinche, because it is he who shows deference to the Spaniards and submits to their power. Along these same lines, Carlos Fuentes writes in 1992 that while Moctezuma was silenced by his own people and Cortés was silenced by the Spanish Crown when he wanted political power for his military accomplishments, the only one whose voice remained was that of La Malinche: "La intérprete, pero también la amante, la mujer de Cortés, La Malinche estableció el hecho central de nuestra civilización multirracial, mezclando el sexo con el lenguaje" (125).

³¹Octavio Paz coined the term *malinchismo*. Loaded with negative connotation, this term implies the accusation of selling out to the foreigners at the cost of one's own substance, usually for personal enrichment and always at the high cost of self-abdication.

La Malinche³², whose original indigenous name seems to have been Malinalli or Malintzin, means sleeping woman. The Spaniards changed it to doña Marina after she was baptized. In Fuentes' play *Todos los gatos son pardos* (1970), the woman initiates the discourse with the words:

Malintzin, Malintzin, Malintzin, Marina, Marina, Marina . . . Malinche, Malinche, Malinche. . . . Tres fueron tus nombres, mujer: el que te dieron tus padres, el que te dio tu amante y el que te dio tu pueblo. Diosa, amante o madre, yo viví esta historia y puedo contarla. . . . Diosa, Malintzin; puta, Marina; madre, Malinche. (Cypess, *La Malinche* 204-05)

Rodríguez chose the name La Malinche for her protagonist because it is the most popular one for the mythical woman. A Tabascan tribe gave Malinalli to Hernán Cortés upon his arrival in Mexico. The soldier and chronicler Bernal Díaz del Castillo wrote in his *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* that the Spaniards were greeted with gifts of various kinds:

y no fue nada este presente en comparación de veinte mujeres, y entre ellas una muy excelente mujer que se dijo doña Marina, que así se llamó después de vuelta cristiana . . . y Cortés las repartió a cada capitán la suya, y a esta doña Marina, como era de buen parecer y entremetida y desenvuelta, dio a

³²Near Tlaxcala there is a volcano which originally was called Matlalciuatl (The Dark Green Woman), about which Maurice Collis observes, "The divine denizen of this mountain was afterward identified with Doña Marina and the mountain is now called Malinche, her name" (233). To this day the volcano is indeed referred to as "la mujer dormida".

Alonso Hernández Puerto Carrerò . . . y desde fue a Castilla el Puerto Carrero estuvo la doña Marina con Cortés, e hobo allí un hijo que se dijo don Martín Cortés. (81-82)

La Malinche became the conqueror's mistress, translator and interpreter. From the beginning she was regarded as an icon, both by the indigenous people who ascribed extraordinary power to her and by the Spaniards for whom she was the exemplary convert and to whom she proved to be invaluable.

As stated in Díaz del Castillo's writings, La Malinche was of noble origin: ". . . quiero decir lo de doña Marina: como desde su niñez fue gran señora y cacica de pueblos y vasallos" (83). Nevertheless, there is no consensus among scholars about this issue and it will probably remain a mystery and a great locus of academic speculation unless undiscovered sources surface. Taking the traditional approach in his classic work *Fire and Blood*, published in 1973, the historian T.R. Fehrenbach argues that Cortés took the woman to himself after he realized she was of noble background (121). Malintzin's story goes as follows: After her father's death her mother remarried and had a son. The parents decided to rid themselves of the true heiress by giving her away to some Indians of Xicalango, and pronounced her dead. The Xicalango Indians gave her to the Tabascans and these in turn handed her over to Cortés. She was to become quintessential to the Spaniards' conquest:

y como doña Marina en todas las guerras de la Nueva España y Tascala y Méjico fue tan ecelente mujer y de buena lengua, como adelante diré, a esta causa la traía siempre Cortés consigo . . . Y la doña Marina tenía mucho ser y mandaba asolutamente entre los indios en toda la Nueva España. (Díaz del Castillo 84)

Communication between the Spaniards and the indigenous tribes occurred in three steps. Malintzin, born in Nahuatl-speaking territory, had ended up in Maya territory, and was therefore already bilingual. (Nahuatl was the most widely spoken language at the time of the arrival of the conquerors). The second important figure in the communication triangle was a Spanish priest who had survived an earlier encounter with the indigenous people and had learned the language of the Maya. This circumstance allowed Cortés to communicate with the Indian nations at large and to hear of their strifes and enmities immediately upon arrival: “Gracias a la presencia simultánea de Jerónimo de Aguilar y de la Malinche, Hernán Cortés iba a contar desde un principio con un sistema perfecto para darse a entender con los aztecas” (León-Portilla, *Visión* 199). This lucky coincidence enabled Cortés to communicate with the emissaries of the emperor Moctezuma from the very onset of his expedition from Veracruz towards the great city of the Aztec empire, Tenochtitlan. Again Bernal Díaz del Castillo attributes great importance to the role that the Indian woman played:

Doña Marina sabía la lengua de Guazacualco, que es la propia de Méjico, y sabía la de Tabasco, como Jerónimo Aguilar sabía la de Yucatán y Tabasco, que es toda una. Entendíanse bien, y el Aguilar lo declaraba en castilla a Cortés; fue gran principio para nuestra conquista, y así se nos hacían todas las cosas loado sea Dios, prósperamente. He querido declarar esto porque sin ir doña Marina no podíamos entender la lengua de la Nueva España y Méjico. (85)

Malintzin also appears in the old sources of historical knowledge of the indigenous peoples.³³ One of the entries states: “Una mujer, de nosotros los de aquí, los viene acompañando, viene hablando en lengua náhuatl. Su nombre Malintzin; su casa Teticpac. Allá en la costa primeramente la cogieron” (León-Portilla, *Visión* 37).

After the independence from Spanish rule (1820) the perspective changed and Malintzin came to symbolize the humiliation and the rape of the indigenous people and the act of treachery that would lead to their oppression (Franco, *Plotting* 131). Jean Franco notes that La Malinche goes from heroine to antiheroine to suit the political rhetoric.

Fehrenbach made several entries on the mythical woman. The historian writes that if there is one villainess in Mexican history, she is Malintzin: “She was to become the ethnic traitress supreme” (131). He takes her side, though, and says that the modern Mexican view is totally emotional and that rather than a symbol of treason, she was simply “an unfortunate and intelligent Amerindian girl, who made the best of the situations life handed her” (131). In her defence Fehrenbach adds that she had no reason to be loyal to the overlords at Tenochtitlan, since she was not Mexica. After this positive stance, however, the historian falls into the same emotional view that he previously condemned. At one point he writes: “. . . the girl

³³León-Portilla enumerates the indigenous sources: “Las estelas mayas y otros monumentos conmemorativos, mayas y nahuas, los códices históricos, *xiuhámatl*, “libros de años”, del mundo náhuatl prehispánico, redactados a base de una escritura principalmente ideográfica e incipientemente fonética, los textos fielmente memorizados en sus centros de educación (*Visión* x-xi).

Malintzin--who was becoming perhaps drunk with power-- . . ." (138) and lets her speak "imperiously" (152) and even "venomously" (158), revealing his own bias.

In the eyes of the well-respected Octavio Paz, Mexican poet, writer, and thinker, there are two female icons in the Mexican psyche: the Virgen of Guadalupe and La Malinche. Guadalupe is the virgin mother, passive, receptive and pure. La Malinche is even more passive:

El símbolo de la entrega es doña Malinche, la amante de Cortés . . .
 ella se da voluntariamente al Conquistador, pero éste, apenas deja de serle útil, la olvida. Doña Marina se ha convertido en una figura que representa a las indias, fascinadas, violadas o seducidas por los españoles. Y del mismo modo que el niño no perdona a su madre que lo abandone para ir en busca de su padre, el pueblo mexicano no perdona su traición a la Malinche.

(Laberinto 77-78)

Paz calls La Malinche the Mexican Eve, as the muralist José Clemente Orozco depicted her, and argues that the Mexican breaks his ties with the past and betrays his origin, ending up in loneliness because of the historic disloyalty of the ancestral mother of the Mexican race. Franco sees the dependent status of the Mexican nation within the modern world as a result of La Malinche's distorted myth:

As in the cult of the Virgin Mary, the scarcity of textual evidence is no drawback to the growth of myth. What is certain is that she was a much-exchanged woman . . . In the narrative of the conquest she is the hero's 'helper'; . . . to the indigenous she became identified with the magical power of the Spaniards . . . [They] painted her into the codices . . . as a translator through whose transparent body words like droplets pass from Cortés' mouth into the ears of Moctezuma. *(Plotting xviii-xix)*

The event parodied in Rodríguez's sketch belongs to one of the most sensitive situations in the history of Mexico, the very centrepiece of the fall of one people and the victory of the other, the event that constitutes the beginning of a five-hundred-year-long search for identity.

Once again the title chosen by Rodríguez for this sketch is a foreshadowing, old history re-presented in our high-tech times. La Malinche comes onto the stage as a newscaster and her programme is Dios T.V., T.V. being the god of our era with its almighty presence, therefore also interpretable as "*Dios te ve*", "God is watching you". La Malinche conveys to the contemporary spectators that they are listening to an indigenous woman because she speaks in that particular way in which words are repeated in a circular form, e.g. "Ora, le digo pero si no dijo eso, le digo" (310). This is very important given the fact that Mexico is deeply divided on racial issues. Even though progress has been made, the indigenous people still suffer severely from the harsh ostracism of their culture by the mainstream. Pure *indios* and darker-skinned *mestizos* continue to be targets of what in other countries is considered brutally incorrect behaviour. To many non-indigenous Mexicans today their pure-blooded native co-citizens are inferior by nature, and Rodríguez plays with this thoroughly ingrained bias, which at least part of her audience has either consciously, unconsciously, or perhaps semi-consciously.

La Malinche's vernacular speech is colloquial, heavily interspersed with words of her own invention, and full of parodic allusions. She addresses her audience with originality and no restraint:

Muy güenas noches amable mingitorio: peatones, chicletos, taxícratas, metronautas, mestizaje en general. Me apersono aquí a cronicarles la

verdadera historia de la fundición de la gran Tecnoctatlán³⁴, cuyos anales quedaron firmemente asentados por Don Carnal Díaz del Castillo, y Fray Teatolondré de las Casas y los terrenos. (308)

In this first sentence she greets her audience with the pronunciation of the word *buenas* as *güenas*, common to the indigenous people whose first language is not Spanish and who struggle with the different sounds.³⁵ She also exchanges the word *auditorio* with *mingitorio* (urinary), as a sign of unscrupulousness, perhaps with the intention to underscore the confusion between similar words, but also mocking the arrogance of T.V. commentators towards the common people and definitely to stimulate the listeners. The people she addresses as the “mestizaje en general” are the common folk who work hard to earn a living, e.g. street-vendors and taxi drivers, and all those who can be seen on an everyday basis on the streets of the city. She wants to tell everyone about the foundation of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan, but uses the word *fundición*, the melting of Tecnoctatlán, a city with a government that has been taken over by purely materialistic pursuits, leaving behind the human factor. The presidents in Mexico since Luis Echeverría Alvarez (1974-1980) are known as *tecnócratas*, because their background is economics and

³⁴For the interpretation of this particular sketch I am indebted to Ignacio Alvarez’s knowledge of Mexican history and politics. We sat together for many hours discussing and untangling the word plays and double meanings that Rodríguez conceives at every bend of the monologue.

³⁵In classical Nahuatl there is neither the “b” nor the “g” sound (Andrews 4-5).

not politics.³⁶ The use of the word *anales* for year books followed by *asentados*, gives it its second possible meaning, which pertains to the anus.

The famous Spanish chroniclers' given names Bernal and Bartolomé are twisted to Carnal and Teatolondré. Rodríguez plays with the word *carnal*, in Mexico a colloquial term for brother, "of the same flesh", thus a blood relation, that extends to those people to whom one feels close. She inserts into the second patronym the verb *atolondrar* (to bewilder in such a way that one is not able to react), and appends to his surname "y los terrenos", thus mocking long aristocratic titles and qualifying de las Casas as a *terrateniente* (landowner). De las Casas was in fact an *encomendero* who later became a priest. From the start Rodríguez's *La Malinche* sets those who own apart from the previously addressed people, the general public, who belong to a different social class.

She continues with her story using pleonasms and barbarisms of the Spanish language, like the obsolete phrase *resúltase de ser que*, instead of the correct *resulta que*, and many commonly heard mispronunciations. *La Malinche* tells her audience how everyone was looking at the screen, the black mirror of Tezcatlívica, a mirror without reflection, dark and hopeless, when something completely unexpected

³⁶In the past there had already been a group of progressive technocrats in the Mexican government, the so called *científicos*, the leading ministers during the Díaz dictatorship that stretched out over more than thirty years and ended with the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The *científicos* advocated a 'scientific' politics, that allowed them to suspend democratic rights to ease economic progress (Williamson 269).

happened. Televisa is the most powerful T.V. network in Mexico, and according to Rodríguez, the perpetuator of the ignorance of modern Mexicans, because of its pervasive nature and the control that a certain group exerts through it. The word Tezcatlivisa is an amalgamation of the real T.V. institution with the god of darkness and sacrifice Tezcatlipoca.³⁷ Suddenly everyone hypnotized by the black mirror gets shaken as the television breaks down and out comes a *monito*, a little creature. In some Latin American countries *monito*, little monkey, is also a word for a slapstick character. This little monkey is no other than the president of Mexico, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, whose name Rodríguez cleverly transforms into “Salido del Atari”, a reference to his originating from the Atari computer. After his dramatic loss in popularity, Salinas was called *mono* or *chango*, and many other nicknames. This creature tells his surprised audience in very vulgar language: “ora sí, jijos de su paleontóloga!” exchanging the commonly used word *madre* in this expression with *paleontóloga*, thus “old mother”, and juxtaposing this fossil-eliciting term with the next “ya les llegó la modernidá” warning all to awaken and catch up with the times,

³⁷In the myth of how the earth and the heavens were created, the gods Tezcatlipoca and Quetzalcoatl forced the great earth monster to descend from heaven, and after a ferocious battle, they ripped her in two. Her lower part rose and turned into the sky, her top part descended and formed the earth. She is the one that was believed to sometimes weep at night, longing to eat human hearts. In this struggle the earth monster bit off the left foot of Tezcatlipoca, which is why in the Mexican Codices he is represented with a mirror replacing his left foot. He is Lord of the Smoking Mirror, and stands for a part of the universe where all is obscured and seen clouded or distorted (Nicholson 35-36, 64-65).

and threatening that on him who resists, “le caerá el chahuíste enchapotado con chipotle y huitlacoche” (308). The expression *caerle a uno el chahuíste* means that disease, pain, and suffering will fall upon one, and so anyone not complying with the adjustments to the changing times, a new era completely devoted to the effort of catching up with the so-called first world, will be cursed. The curse is a mixture of tary maize disease, *chahuíste*, and the edible fungal maize growth *huitlacoche*, considered a delicacy, in hot *chipotle*, a tasty smoked red pepper sauce. The *monito* finishes this partly mouthwatering, partly disgusting mix of food and disease with the imperious sentence, “¡He dicho!”, reminding everyone of his power, where his is the last word (308). The allusion “cuando de repente ¡zaz! que se nos cae el telesistema” refers to the great scandal caused during the 1988 elections (308). For the first time in Mexican history computers were set up to monitor the voting process in the presumed attempt to eliminate fraud. The surprise was great when in the beginning the opposition candidate Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas was in the lead. José Agustín Ramírez describes in his *Tragicomedia mexicana. La vida en México de 1982 a 1994* how at this critical moment the highly influential Joseph-Marie Córdoba, an intimate friend of the candidate Salinas, who became *secretario de la presidencia*, a position that did not exist before, “tomó control de la situación, ordenó la desconexión del sistema y que ese cuarto fuera resguardado por una guardia feroz, en lo que veían la magnitud del daño y preparaban la alquimia necesaria” (155). The news reached the people through Televisa with the words: “se nos cayó el sistema” (156). Needless to say, Salinas became president.

The emperor during the fall of the Aztecs, Moctezuma,³⁸ in the commentator's jargon pronounced "Moitezuma", again a typical mispronunciation, is the first one to react to the speech of this *monito*. He has not understood a word. And after his "¿y ora éste qué dijo?", La Malinche, sounding equal in status with the emperor, answers excitedly: "Nomás eso me faltaba le digo, andarte traduciendo de Náhuatl a Náhuatl, ¡házme el jeroglífico favor!", parodying the misunderstandings and miscommunication among the Mexican people themselves and ending with a sarcastic remark on the way the written word, the official press, changes things around and censors in such a way, that the news is no longer the same when it is told to the public (308). But, Moctezuma insists, he is surprised at the *monito* that he has never seen before: "nunca me había salido" meaning out of the screen, but also with a further dual significance of a stamp that fills in the collection. He believes that "laguna verde" might have exploded. Laguna Verde is the name of the place and the energy plant in Veracruz that was constructed against much criticism and at enormous cost. It is said that the safety and the security of the nuclear reactor are questionable, and many Mexicans believe that Mexico was not prepared to have nuclear energy. With her description of the appearance of the reactor "parecía un Stubeker 63 remodelado en la Doctores" La Malinche alludes to the cheaply and

³⁸Moctezuma II (1466-1520) was the Aztec emperor, when the Spanish conquistadors arrived. Cortés put an end to his authority in 1519, when Moctezuma submitted to the Spaniards and was treacherously arrested. He died wounded by his own subjects who were revolting against their emperor's weakness and submission.

badly finished product, which resembles an old Studebaker, and to the colonia Doctores, which is one of the poorest districts in Mexico City, where everything stolen is resold, particularly auto parts (308).

Rodríguez's *La Malinche* plays with the verb "decir" throughout the entire sketch using all its variations and encompassing many idiomatic expressions. First she mocks the expression of the "monito's" "he dicho", followed by Moctezuma's "¿qué dijo?" and then *La Malinche's* "le digo, dice, me dice", and Moctezuma's command "tú jálate p'a Veracruz, a ver qué ves, nomás no le digas a nadie" (308). With indignity *La Malinche* counters: "¡Ay sí!--le digo--pos de cuando acá yo ando diciendo, o qué te vinieron a decir que yo había dicho, a ver ¡dime! ¿quién te dijo?" (308). All expressions are commonly used and resonate fully in the audience's minds. Moctezuma answers *La Malinche's* question with another one: "¡No!--si yo nomás decía" (308). This play with the verb "to say" stands in close reference with *La Malinche's* historical role as an interpreter. Her function was to speak and to mediate with words between the encountering peoples. Nevertheless, she has been vilified for having done precisely that which she was ordered to do by her superiors. Ironically she has gone down in history as the one who spoke too much. Rodríguez's figure resents Moctezuma's distrust and successfully pushes him on the defensive.

La Malinche continues her story on how she goes to the Villa Rica, the name given to Veracruz because of its fertility, to check on the "riactor". The woman's mispronunciation of the word *reactor* is quite common in the colloquial oral Mexican Spanish. Her surprise is great when she sees three caravels arriving, an allusion to the famous three sailing ships (the *Niña*, the *Pinta*, and the *Santa María*) that arrived in 1492 under the command of Christopher Columbus. The present-day ships are manned with "unos güerotes, ira, mitad hombres, mitad hot pants" who call

themselves “marines”. *Ira* is a colloquial short form for *mira* and what the flabbergasted woman sees are men who are half blond giants, half tight pants, who, the way she says it, evoke images of mythical centaurs, in an allusion to their partial bestiality. La Malinche is filled with wonder at this sight, nevertheless, as a good interpreter, she corrects their bad Spanish and instructs the newcomers: “Se dice marinos” (308) to which the sailor stubbornly answers, “no . . . marines” (309). Rodríguez is unmistakably making a reference to the Spanish and then the American interference in Mexican affairs. The sailor explains, “Nosotros ser marines y venir a controlar el narcotráfico, querer ver a Moctezumo y saber que tú ser el mejor conecte” (309). Without proper background the foreigners arrive assuming to be able to solve a problem, without previously communicating this to the people involved. As self-interest is the driving force, they do know who will be of service, La Malinche, but they do not know the correct name of the emperor whose land they are about to enter. The irony is at a peak. Rodríguez mocks the Americans’ broken Spanish, a language they learn just to get by to impose their views on the people they are about to invade. Proud and self-sufficient, the woman scolds the ignorant marine “Ora sí--le digo--me va a enseñar usted a hablar castellense ¡a mí! la única mujer admitida en la Academí Frambués³⁹, única traductora y cunilingua de toda Mesoamérica ¡házme el precortesiano favor!” (309). The term *cunilingua* contains the Spanish words *coño* and *lengua* and refers to oral sexual practice. The use of this term coincides with Fuentes’ observation of the coming together of sex and language in the figure of the mythical woman. La Malinche’s reaction in the sketch is refreshing in view of the heavy load this historic figure has been carrying around

³⁹The Alliance Française has a long tradition in Mexico.

for centuries. She gives herself the place she deserves and knows what she is worth. Human that she is, she also feels flattered by being called the *conecte*, a slang word used in the subculture to describe a connection to something illegal, or at least not transparent and clean. It is used in the drugworld, but it carries a sexual connotation as well, and that is the one La Malinche picks up and immediately reacts to: “¡Ay güero, pos tú dirás!” (309), inviting him to more advances. Rodríguez is hinting again at the inherent problematic of misunderstandings between cultures. A short exchange of sexually loaded dialogue takes place in which the marine does not get the allusions and La Malinche is shamelessly suggesting that all he needs to do is ask. The marine pulls out four grams (it is not specified grams of what), but the talk has been about narcotics, and with the previous evocation of the conquest, gold is also in mind, perhaps even a naughty allusion to physical size. Needless to say, La Malinche is ready, “así sí, le digo” (309). She wishes the man had a “kawaski” rather than a “Carabela” both motor bike brand names, the first one mispronounced (Kawasaki), but faster than the Carabela, and they are on their way: “eróticamente rumbo a la gran Tecnocratlán” (309).

The following conversation is all around language barriers and misunderstandings, but La Malinche is impressed, because these “güeros” have it all, closely recreating many Mexicans’ astonishment, in the past and in the present, when they are exposed to the material wealth of the foreigners. When the *güero* asks her: “¿te enchufo el compa?” (309), La Malinche is offended because she understands him to mean that he proposes to give her to his *compadre*, when all he is asking is if he should plug in the compact disk. “Hasta me ardían las orejas” (309) is another sexually loaded expression, and the following “con decirles que agarré un fast forguar de esos que ya no hay riguaind y me entregué al puritito placer digital”

(309), she refers to the “quicky” or *rapidito* with no return, which La Malinche submits to with “digital” pleasure.

Rodríguez uses English words adapted to the Spanish pronunciation, like “fast forguar” and “riguaind”, mocking the Mexican inability to pronounce the “w” sound. La Malinche waves conceitedly at some *tlaxcaltecas* when she sees them on a “vespa”, an even smaller bike, because she is riding more luxuriously. La Malinche asks them “¿qué, ustedes van a decir?” (309) reminding the audience that the *tlaxcaltecas* joined forces with the Spaniards to overthrow the Aztecs. As the row of bikers, “la fila de motos” (a *moto* being the short form for *motocicleta* but also a term used for a marihuana smoker) is entering Xochimilco, La Malinche’s pride turns into shame, because she realizes the state of decay of the once-wonderful valley, “porque de aquel gran Valle de México ya nomás quedaba el vaye y chingue a su madre, de las doscientas especies animales sólo se conservaban los ruta 100, el metro nos lo habían metido centímetro a centímetro y hasta el mero centro . . . histórico” (309). In other words, the original place is gone and the city has been desecrated, a fact emphasized by the expletive expression, *vaya y chingue a su madre* (the worst of all insults used in Mexico), and the image of a subway penetrating the city centimeter by centimeter into its core. The allusion points at the privatization campaign of the Salinas government, that reversed the efforts of former presidents, without the promised benefits, since the moneys earned from the sales disappeared into private pockets. “La ruta 100”⁴⁰ is a busdrivers’ union that resisted

⁴⁰The busdrivers’ union is one of the most powerful ones in the country. It has supported and contributed money to the Zapatista movement.

the government intervention, and the reference to it as “especie animal” arises from the fact that the particular buses driven on that route are called *delfines*.

La Malinche is aware of the visible rape of the city and maintains that it is all the fault of the “retemoto” (*rete* is a slang prefix for “very” and *moto* “stoned”), instead of “terremoto”, the 1985 earthquake, which truly was devastating in casualties as well as in material damage. In political terms, Rodríguez is making reference to the heavy involvement in the drug-trafficking business of the president in office in 1985, Miguel de la Madrid.

La Malinche and the gang arrive in the “zócalo” where the old “Tlatoanis” (kings), the so called *dinosaurios*, the old guard politicians, are discussing the necessity of a change in political parties, a hint to the internal confrontations between PRI members. However, Moctezuma, who is head of the old politicians, oblivious to the political, can only think of soccer matches and recommends the “necaxa vs toluca”, interpreting the word *partido* not as a political party, but as a game between two soccer teams (309). The reference to Toluca can be further expanded to the politician Carlos Hank González, a *dinosaurio* from that city in the Estado de México.

Suddenly Moctezuma realizes the presence of the newcomers, who have been standing silently (“paradotes, pasmados, como posesos”), as if possessed by the devil, and asks: “¿Pos esos?” in a verbal blow (309). La Malinche introduces the foreigner with the words: “Güeno majestad . . . este es el señor embajador Pónganse”, which fills Moctezuma with indignation (309). He interprets *pónganse* as a command directed at him, since the emperor is addressed in the plural form. *Ponte* however is a vulgar way to tell someone to submit in order to be penetrated. La Malinche uses the polite plural form of the verb *poner*, because, as she says

“perdone, es que en realidad se apellida Ponte, Negro Ponte, pero por respeto a su alta investidura le decimos Pónganse” (309). In another bright and dirty word play Rodríguez has turned the marine into the American ambassador in Mexico and has given her opinion on what this important figure is up to as well, namely to violate and exploit the situation.

La Malinche once again uncovers the weakness of the Mexican, this time by showing the corruption of the political representatives, who change camps according to convenience. As the *tlatoanis* hear that they are before an ambassador and not just anyone, their behaviour changes immediately, and they revert to exaggerated politeness with “pase por aquí señor embajador, y que pase por acá distinguido amigo y que pase usted, y que otro pase . . . y que ya el último porque está fuertísima . . .” (310). By twisting the words and giving them double meaning, Rodríguez suddenly has them all smoking marihuana and “ya bien lúcidos”, really lucid from the potent herb, they start working out their agreement.

What follows is a dialogue between the emperor and the ambassador, who offers all the new technological gadgets, praising their usefulness and importance. Moctezuma, impressed, accepts the treaty: “les daremos lo que pidan con tal de que el pueblo siga la huella” (310), agreeing to everything as long as the *pueblo* follows the lead. The American states the deal: “Pues nosotros querer controlar el narcotráfico porque ya estar hartos de tanta competencia desleal, dice, y nosotros querer firmar acuerdo para introducir todo lo que sea posible” (310). Rodríguez makes strong declarations when she has the mariner say “controlar” and “competencia desleal”, terms that accuse the Americans of hypocrisy, since what they want is not to stop the drug-trafficking, but to have a cut of the profit. The American also wants a fair share of the market because, as he puts it, Mexicans are

exporting a myriad of goods, and again his ignorance is shown when he throws “chichicuilotos” a small long-legged bird, into the same category with “lechugas, jitomates y aguacates” calling everything animals in extinction. The Americans on their side introduce all their prepackaged, highly processed foods like “twinkis, hershys, sabritones y pop cornes, para hacer en un minuto en su microgüey” (310). The parody is now on the free trade agreement, an arrangement that is far from being as free as its name implies. Moctezuma, egocentric as any spoiled nobleman, and as many politicians of these days, particularly the infamous Salinas, has the last word, and even though things were going along nicely, is terribly offended. He thinks he has been called *microgüey* by his trade partner, *güey* being a common word for lout. “Eso lo serás tú”, he says defensively, and La Malinche intercedes at this sudden turn of events. She and Moctezuma argue as they have before, using all the possible forms of *decir*. Moctezuma is outraged: “No oíste que me dijo güey y además chiquito” (310). La Malinche tries to mediate: “Ora, le digo pero si no te dijo eso, le digo”, but Moctezuma is finished, and offended he replies: “. . . así que dile que yo ya ni le digo nada nomás porque no quiero decirle” (310), after which he starts playing with his *nana*, the nursemaid, a childish behaviour, but also a quick-witted evocation of the widely published story on the accidental assassination of the Salinas brothers’ nursemaid.⁴¹ Infuriated by Moctezuma’s retreat, the *güero* grabs the

⁴¹The story about the assassination of the servant surged out of the past at the time when Salinas was being denounced, after his deplorable exit from office and the country. The brothers Raúl and Carlos killed their nanny because they fired a loaded gun with which they had been playing.

suddenly appeared Cuauhtemoc.⁴² The mention of this heroic figure will immediately evoke the story about the burning of the soles of his feet. Cuauhtemoc is also the first name of Cárdenas, who ran for president against Salinas in 1988.

The sketch alludes to the historical moment when Cuauhtemoc is being tortured by the Spaniards. “A ver, dinos, ¿por qué te has andado perrodeando de tanta gente?” (310), asks the ambassador, calling Cuauhtemoc a *dino* (dinosaur from the old PRI) and alluding to his newly formed party PRD, *perrodeando* sounding very close to *pedorreando*, a vulgar term for flatulence. Cuauhtemoc does not lose control: “Pos no les digo, dice el Cuauhtemoc, y no les dijo” (310). Suddenly Rosario Ibarra says “¡Ahí está! ¿no que en este país se respetan los derechos humanos y la libertad de expresión está plenamente garantizada en la carta de deberes y deberás más” (310), ridiculing the supposed freedom of expression that exists on paper in Mexico, but that everyone knows is not guaranteed. Ibarra is a woman, who after the mysterious disappearance of her son, became very vocal and started campaigning for human rights. She uses the word “garan-tiznada”, a neologism with the word *tiznar*, meaning “smudged”, “smeared” or “blackened”, to point out the obscurity around the issue of human rights. It also can be understood as “garantiz-nada”, negating the guarantee. Instead of a *carta de derechos y deberes*,

⁴²Cuauhtemoc was the last Aztec emperor who reigned from 1520 to 1522. He heroically defended the city of Tenochtitlan but he was defeated by Cortés and taken prisoner. He was tortured by the burning of his feet and is remembered for the serenity that he demonstrated and because he refused to tell his torturers the whereabouts of the royal treasure. Three years later Cortés ordered him to be hanged.

she mentions one that has responsibilities and more responsibilities, cleverly put as “deberes y deberás más”, in view that the responsibility has no end and will always be more demanding, particularly in terms of money owed. The *güero*, however, quickly defends himself: “¡Claro! . . . , si lo estamos torturando es para que hable, no para censurarlo”, confusing the meaning of what Ibarra is trying to state, and ironically orders her to shut up or else he threatens to bring in Muñoz Ledo (311). The parody is at another peak, when the American becomes the torturer, a pointed reference to the role of the US government and its liaisons with Latin American totalitarian regimes. The threat to Ibarra works, because she immediately backs off, saying: “No por favor, ahí que quede” (311). Porfirio Muñoz Ledo is considered one of the most brilliant politicians in Mexico. He and Cárdenas formed the PRD, Cárdenas in the role of the leader and Muñoz Ledo as the intellectual force behind him. He was once party president of the PRI.

La Malinche continues with her story telling how just before Cuauhtemoc is going to be killed with a jade blade, Muñoz Ledo does appear and imperiously intervenes: “¡dejade ese Cuchillo! changing “de jade” into the invention “dejade” as in “leave be”, and asks everyone to count to ten, which he does in Nahuatl, demonstrating his knowledge and culture. Nevertheless things worsen and the result is violent: “se agarraron de las greñas, y volaron tepalcates . . . ¡hasta la Coyolchauhqui se fue a resquebrajar a un rincón!” (311). With the expression *agarrarse de las greñas*, which is used when women get into a fight, a reference to the supposed homosexual orientation of Muñoz Ledo is made. The fight is wild: clay pots fly and the people involved tear each other’s hair out. By mentioning the goddess of the moon, Coyolchauhqui, the wrath of Huitzilopochtli, her half brother and god of war who killed her and threw her down the ravine leaving her in pieces,

is evoked and the audience can imagine the destruction that must have followed Cuauhtemoc's death, which was indeed the end of the Aztec empire. Symbolically it is the death of the opposition leader as well, and the expression of a "falling system" is an adequate metaphor to describe the complete breakdown.

After this La Malinche, the commentator, ends her confidential information, as she calls it, and the news take a more public tone, one in which La Malinche *per se* is no longer involved. She mentions the programme "hoy no circula" that has resulted in a "duro golpe contra el narcotráfico" (311). "Hoy no circula" is an allusion to the controversial law that regulates vehicle circulation in Mexico City. In an attempt to cut down on traffic every car has to be off the streets once a week. This impinges on the freedom of movement of all citizens and their activities (including the *narco-tráfico*), except for the very wealthy who own several cars, and thereby circumvent any rules.

Next La Malinche mentions the upcoming "quinto centenario" already discussed in *La gira mamal de la Coatlicue*. This time the protagonist imagines how the angel head of the valuable gold coin will be substituted by the head of Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez⁴³, who has been the effigy on the smallest coin, the five cent or *quinto*, since the time of its conception, pointing with biting irony at the chronic devaluation of the Mexican *peso*. The agency responsible for the preparation of the festivities to commemorate the *quinto centenario* was the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, which Rodríguez blasphemously calls CONELCUL, eliciting the idea of doing things *con el culo*, an expression going beyond the more popular one

⁴³Josefa Ortiz de Domínguez was a Mexican heroine of the Independence. She was called the Corregidora de Querétaro.

con las patas used when something is done badly and carelessly. Needless to say, Rodríguez's opinion on the issue of the celebration around the five hundred-year anniversary of the so called encounter of the Old and the New Worlds is negative and matches the opinion of the majority of the people in Latin America who fought for a non-celebration instead. Further, gold turns into copper and literally becomes valueless: "se trata de un centenario que en el fondo es un quinto", *fondo* having its double-meaning of "deep" or "actually", but also in the meaning of funds, expressing the truth about the worthless money.

Just before the end La Malinche plays with the verb *decir* once more:

Y ya para despedirme, les digo, yo por eso mejor no digo, porque ya me vinieron a decir, ira Malinche mejor ni dígas, me dicen, porque luego si andas diciendo ya no te van a dejar decir, yo por eso ya no digo, porque como dice el dicho: Más vale no andar diciendo que andar diciendo y no andar, o como dice el otro: más vale el güeno con quien hablo que esto es una grabación. (311)

The puns La Malinche uses are reminiscent of Cantinflas' humour and style. Rodríguez is stretching the usage of the verb to its maximum, quoting popular sayings, reminding the audience of the implications of having spoken too much, and the reason for her dismissal out of the official history for so long. At the end, however, she mocks everything by making a joke "güeno con quien hablo . . ." (311) ("Bueno, ¿con quién hablo?"), which is the customary way to answer the telephone in Mexico. La Malinche dismisses her audience by using the typical sentence newscasters use: "Informó para ustedes" and plays with the words one last time: "en seco y en silencio directo Malintzin Malinalli Marina para Dios T.V." (311). To

end the commentary Malinche mocks the original name of a popular newscast “Eco”, where the same news was repeated hourly during the day.

La Malinche en: Dios T.V. is a masterpiece of difficult elocution and great self-effacing humour. The density of double meaning is almost impenetrable and only a very attentive and knowledgeable audience will catch all the puns, jokes, and innuendos, but even those who do not catch all allusions will have a good laugh. The openness to her own shortcomings makes Rodríguez’s version of La Malinche and her message palatable to an audience brought up to accept as dogma the rigid patriarchal representation of this figure. Alzate believes the cabaret gives Rodríguez the possibility to represent La Malinche with a sexuality constructed in a different way: “Jesusa no reemplaza la figura de La Malinche, pero la pone entrecomillas, la expropia, la desliga de la red de procedimientos de los que se vale el poder para sostener su estructura hegemónica” (“Jesusa” 95). While the sketch *La gira mamal de la Coatlicue* is almost lyrical and can be seen as an evocative poem of origin and pride, *La Malinche en: Dios T.V.* is a cunning essay on Mexican politics, an astute comment on colonialism and neocolonialism, a study of comparison between past and present.

In the next piece, *Sor Juana en Almoloya. (Pastorela virtual)*, Rodríguez will go beyond the sketch format. The play written in 1995 is situated in 2000 and forces the audience to look into a virtual future. The irony lies in the realization, that time actually stands still, because things have not changed much.

Chapter VI

Sor Juana en Almoloya. (Pastorela virtual)

Sor Juana en Almoloya (Pastorela virtual) is a play in one act whose three-pronged and richly suggestive title, as in the case of the previous plays, will induce some thought or emotion in every Mexican or in anyone interested in Mexican issues. Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz is a Mexican female icon par excellence, and every child in the school system has read her poems. She symbolizes pride and courage for the nation, and she has become one of the main figures revised by the feminist movement. During her lifetime she was already recognized as colonial Latin America's greatest poet, called by her editors the "Tenth Muse" and *Fénix de América*. She has been triply canonized and is considered the origin for Latin American literature, the epitome of Baroque literature in Spanish, and the first feminist writer in the New World (Bergmann 151).

The second component of the title is *Almoloya*, the name of the high-security prison north of Mexico City, where Raúl Salinas de Gortari, brother of former Mexican president Carlos Salinas is serving a sentence for illicit enrichment. He is also involved in the assassination of a former PRI candidate and in drug affairs.

The word *pastorela* describes the genre of the play, although it is a "virtual" and not a "typical" one. This concept catapults us unequivocally into the turn of our century, an age of technology and electronics. The oxymoronic combination of *pastorela* and *virtual* must alert the public to its iconoclastic nature. The title itself brings past and present together and insinuates the notion of the baroque heroine as a prisoner of masculine control.

Juana de Asbaje was born *criolla*, of Spanish blood on Mexican soil, in Nepantla around 1648. She refused to walk the traditional path and chose to become

a nun rather than marry and give up her intellectual interests. During her lifetime, Juana de Asbaje was admired but also shamed for being outrageously unconventional. Simultaneous to her glorification, the attitude of disrespect by some sectors of society has been present throughout the centuries. Even eighteen years ago she was used by the psychoanalyst of Mexican culture, Octavio Paz, in his massive work *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o Las trampas de la fe*, in which he goes into impossible detail and speculation about her sexual preferences and behaviours, considering that he is approximately three hundred years her junior.

Sor Juana was possibly born out of wedlock; what we know for certain is that her father left the family early on. At the age of seven she asked her mother for boys' clothes so she could enter the university, and in her adolescence surprised the viceregal court with her brilliant intelligence, knowing, it seemed, everything there was to know from Latin to Mathematics. Nevertheless, she soon realized that it was not seen as proper for a woman of colonial Mexico to display such avid interest in realms considered solely accessible to men. After deciding to become a Jeronymite nun, in order to escape the envy and hostility of the outside world, in the convent of San Jerónimo she dedicated herself to her passion and managed to unite religion and letters to create an astounding volume of work. Carlos Fuentes writes about her:

Y como nadie era más silencioso en la sociedad colonial que las mujeres, quizás sólo una mujer pudo darle voz a esa sociedad, sin dejar de admitir, lúcidamente, las divisiones de su cabeza y de su corazón: “En dos partes dividida/ tengo el alma en confusión:/ una, esclava a la pasión,/ y otra, a la razón medida”. (215)

Sor Juana's intellectual independence was not guaranteed in her cell. She continued to be a threat to the status quo and she was often reminded of her precarious position

by Church authorities. Her main persecutor was the archbishop of Mexico, Aguiar y Seijas, who finally put an end to the freedom Sor Juana had carved for herself. At the end she gave away all her books, musical instruments, her pens, and her inkwells, and silenced her creativity forever. In 1695, three years after this severance, she died from the plague.

Sor Juana's impressive legacy explains the myriad of secondary literature that she has inspired. There are diverse interpretations as to how much she wrote on her own behest, because a lot of it was requested work, and in her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* she says: "yo nunca he escrito sino violentada y forzada y sólo por dar gusto a otros; no sólo sin complacencia, sino con positiva repugnancia" (829). In any case she wrote sacred and profane poetry, drama, comedy, and prose.

As contemporary readers have reread Sor Juana's works, and as scholars have explored the complexity and subtlety of her classical allusions and scientific knowledge, she has become emblematic of the creative woman's need to have special privilege in order to develop and exercise her talents in a culture that limits women's options. Her life is also an illustration of the precariousness of that position, because even after she achieved recognition, everything was taken away from her (Bergmann 152). The remarkable thing about Sor Juana's writings is her clear awareness of her decision to depart from the norm and her unflinching confrontation with the consequences of those decisions. She voiced her protest against the injustice of women's place in the hypocritical society she lived in, and of her own position of privilege at an impossible price. She defended herself and women in general in direct, first-person statements in her prose, through irony in her poetry, and through the character of Doña Leonor in her play *Los empeños de una casa*. In defense of her scholarly pursuits, she wrote her autobiographical letter,

Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz, in which she explained that in order to continue studying, she rejected marriage and chose to live in a convent. In her defense she writes that she is solely interested in knowledge:

Yo no quiero ruido con el Santo Oficio, que yo soy ignorante y tiemblo de decir alguna proposición malsonante o torcer la genuina inteligencia de algún lugar. Yo no estudio para escribir, ni menos para enseñar (que fuera en mí desmedida soberbia), sino sólo por ver si con estudiar ignoro menos. (829)

Her self-depiction is daring and dangerous, and she admits to being defiant and unable to repress her intellectual curiosity, which after all was given to her by God:

(. . . me ha hecho Dios la merced de darme grandísimo amor a la verdad) que desde que me rayó la primera luz de la razón, fue tan vehemente y poderosa la inclinación a las letras, que ni ajenas reprensiones--que he tenido muchas--ni propias--que he hecho no pocas--han bastado a que deje de seguir este natural impulso que Dios puso en mí. (830)

She calls her love of letters a vice, and thanks God for it (834). She also says that even when the Church objected to her studies in natural science, she could not stop herself from making scientific observations in the kitchen. Her determination and cleverness, however, would not suffice. The Church hierarchy considered her potentially heretical, and her vows ultimately bound her to obedience to her superiors.

According to Bergmann, Hispanic women writers regard her as a kind of patron saint (157). After Sor Juana's death, women writers and critics continued to be excluded from the mainstream of cultural life, and separated from a significant role model by her distortion as legend during the three centuries following her birth. As Frederick Luciani believes,

Desde entonces [1700], la crítica biográfica ha intentado recrear a Sor Juana a través de una pesquisa textual que nunca da con la persona histórica, sino con textos anteriores, que no son necesariamente más confiables por acercarse más a la vida de la monja en términos cronológicos . . . Las interpretaciones que resultan de estas pesquisas varían según la “tesis” que los biógrafos quieren comprobar. (395)

Luciani says that the astounding number of biographies can be divided into a few general categories,

la hagiográfica, de augusto linaje y de una perdurabilidad impresionante; la romántica, que surgió en el siglo XIX y que no da señas de desaparecer pronto; la psicoanalítica, que da sus frutos más extravagantes en Pfandl; la nacionalista, que se ha renovado en diversos períodos históricos; la feminista, un producto de las últimas décadas, y que se encuentra todavía en proceso de desarrollo. (395-6)

The first major studies of her work were done by men. Profoundly influenced by Freudian thought, Ludwig Pfandl wrote in his biographical work of 1946, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. La décima musa de México*, “Juana Inés fue una personalidad trágica en el sentido más hondo de la palabra. Su tragedia consistió en esto: en que aunque nació mujer, no hubiera debido serlo” (311). The absurdity of this statement is a good example to illustrate the long and arduous trajectory that feminist thinking has had to overcome to arrive at the present consciousness. For Pfandl the nun was a perfect object of study to be psychoanalyzed and he arrives at conclusions that can no longer be taken seriously and have been thoroughly rejected by modern revisionist scholarship.

In *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz o Las trampas de la fe* Paz tries to make an almost exhaustive study of Sor Juana as well as of her time and the circumstances surrounding her. This substantial work is, according to Mónica Mansour, a universe of information. The critic writes: “Sin embargo, su libro desemboca en una interpretación que, por su discurso mismo, hace de [Sor Juana] un personaje paradójico y contradictorio, tanto para sí misma como para el estudioso de este fin de milenio” (368). She states that Paz contradicts himself continually and dedicates eight pages of her essay to demonstrate it statement by statement. Paz indeed makes declarations in his work, published in 1982, that are hard to prove. Elaborating on a point made by Pfandl about women’s menopause, and admitting that nobody knows when and if Sor Juana went through this stage, Paz writes: “los efectos del climaterio no son tan terribles como los describe Pfandl y, lo que es más importante, afectan sobre todo a las casadas y a las mujeres que tienen una vida sexual activa. No era ése el caso de Juana Inés” (605).

Paz also mentions two feminine archetypes: “La Antigüedad nos dejó dos arquetipos femeninos, Venus y Diana.⁴⁴ Es claro que la personalidad de Juana Inés estaba más cerca de la segunda que de la primera: Diana no es la diosa del matrimonio sino de la vida casta y solitaria de los cazadores” (146). He deduces that the decision to live in a convent could not have been driven by the real or supposed existence of one or more loves (146). Paz represents the old paradigm and feminist scholars have taken his work apart to expose its shortcomings. Rodríguez renders

⁴⁴Paz’s insistence in classifying women in A or B is well known to his readers. He gave enough evidence of this in his earlier book, *El laberinto de la soledad* (1950).

her own view in the play that was staged in 1995, just after the change of government in Mexico.

The play *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is a biting parody that reverses all things sacred to Mexican society. In it Paz's verbose study on Sor Juana is closely scrutinized; the former president of the PRI, a God-like figure while in power, is accused of corruption and immorality; and homophobia is addressed without circumlocution.

The one-act-play is a multimedia performance, where past, present, and future all converge in this one cell, Sor Juana's cloister presented as Mexico's highest-security prison built for the most dangerous offenders of society.

The year is 2000 and Juana is surrounded by antique and virtual artifacts and she has learned to use new technology. The stage directions indicate that on her desk there is, next to her old pen, inkwell, books, etc., one of the first Apple computers on the market. There is also a cot, a huge video screen and an old grand piano. At the beginning of the play Juana is reading the letter that Carlos Salinas wrote in his own defense in 1995, after he had left the country. Projected on the big screen is the text and a picture of the ex-president dressed as Sor Filotea. The nun is laughing out loud at what she reads: Salinas suggested that the accusations against him were a conspiracy of Echeverría.⁴⁵ Qualifying the writer as "hábil" and "listo" (395) because "con eso logró que no lo culparan de nada, ni lo trajeron a declarar sobre los asesinatos y el derrumbe del país, ni devolvió un quinto de todo lo que se

⁴⁵Luis Echeverría Alvarez was an earlier president (1970-76), who followed a policy of nationalization, while Salinas privatized every possible enterprise, lamentably not to the benefit of the country.

robó” (395), Juana concludes that either “el tipo” was a genius or his contemporaries “unos pendejos” (396). In the present moment Juana realizes that her chance, however slim, to be set free has arrived because the PAN has won the election. She decides to answer the five-year-old letter with “La Respuesta Zopilotea”. The transformation of *Sor Filotea* into *Zopilotea* reflects Rodríguez’s perspective on the state of affairs of Mexican politics. Salinas is compared with a carrion eating buzzard, a creature considered filthy and revolting. What follows is a short parody of “La Respuesta a Sor Filotea”, in which Rodríguez’s Sor Juana sarcastically initiates the ironic tone of the original letter, accusing Salinas, by addressing him with an absurd litany of titles for having helped the *panistas* to get to power:

Ex-celentísimo, Ex-señor, Ex-presidente CSG. Carlos Sinvergüenza y
Góngora, Salinas de Gortari, Familia de la Cerda, Portorratero de Cárdenas,
Conde de Sanborn’s, Marqués de Agualeguas, Virrey de Liconsa y
Gobernador actual del yate “Eco” en las felices costas de la Habana, Cuba.
(396)

Rodríguez uses the patronym of Mexican priest and writer Carlos de Sigüenza y Góngora (1645-1700) to qualify Salinas as a *sinvergüenza*. She mocks the surname de la Cerda, the family name of a viceroy of New Spain, to call Salinas’ family a family of pigs. Portorratero is a deviation of Portocarrero or Puerto Carrero, another Spanish patronym, that she uses to accuse him of being the thief who stole the votes from his adversary Cárdenas in the elections of 1988. Count of Sanborn’s refers to a famous, originally American restaurant chain in Mexico, Marquis of Agualeguas to Salinas’ birthplace, Viceregal of Liconsa to the state-owned milk enterprise. Finally she calls him governor of his own yacht “Eco”, in which he sailed off into his self-imposed exile.

Rodríguez's Sor Juana believes that by perversely linking the seventeenth and twenty-first centuries with virtual technology, the government has imposed in Mexico "un imperio de horror y persecución", leaving all exempt from guilt except those who, like her, "sólo pecamos de pensar libremente" (396). Her reasons for answering only five years later, she says, are that she is a prisoner and the objects surrounding her are a false two-dimensional library, furniture on holograms, and an outdated computer.

She touches on the stories of fraud and cowardly self-preservation that were in the news at that time and quotes Quintilian⁴⁶, "*Minorem Spei, Maiorem Benefacti Gloriam Pariunt*" o sea: 'El menos tonto se beneficia de los alias de sus parientes' o como también dijo Quintiliano: 'Mientras el que se pudra sea tu hermano . . .'" (397) in direct reference to the Salinas' family affairs. By using the Latin quote, she reminds the audience of the erudition of the protagonist and points to the fact that Carlos' brother Raúl took the brunt of the accusations against the family by redirecting the attention to his crimes rather than to Carlos. Juana suspects that Raúl may be freed under parole, because the *sexenio* has come to an end, but she will be punished and severely humiliated "sólo por ser mujer e inclinarme a la cogitación⁴⁷" (397).

⁴⁶Marcus Fabius Quintilian, born in Calahorra (30A.D.-100A.D.?) was a Hispanic-Roman rhetorician who reacted against the affected style of his contemporaries.

⁴⁷*Cogitación* is a neologism, which Juana is using in the sense of *cavilación* (*cogitabundo: preocupado, pensativo*), but in the obvious word play it points towards the colloquial meaning of the verb *coger*, which in Mexico has sexual

The modern day Juana uses technological jargon, which is an anglicized Spanish influenced by computer language. She is very human, full of life, and her tone is colloquial. Since, as she explains, she was not born with a mouse in her hand, she pushes the wrong button, which materializes her court-appointed lawyer. This character, the second to appear on stage, is the caricature of a corrupt *licenciado*, who in exchange for money has agreed to swap clothes with the “virreina”, the countess de Paredes, whose pseudonym was Lysi in Sor Juana’s writings to her.

The relationship between Sor Juana and the countess has been the main focus of biographers when making conjectures about the nun’s love life. The lawyer on stage feels comfortable with the deal and starts identifying with the woman whose clothes he is using, an indication that he can switch personalities with ease and also a hint at the dubiousness of his integrity. While he is speaking in rhymes to the audience, Juana writes the “Soneto 165”, and when she is finished, she reads it out loud inviting the spectators to interact: “opinad amigos míos, os suplico intervengáis/ pues un público pasivo/ no cumple con el reclamo/ de un soneto interactivo” (400). The sonnet is addressed to the “mugre pelón por quien penosa vivo”, and after alluding to Salinas’ privatization campaign, she tells him that his tyranny will not affect her “que aunque quede librado el lazo estrecho/ que la agencia de drogas te tendía/ poco importa burlar balas al pecho/ si te labra prisión Echeverría (no, mejor) mi fantasía . . .” (400). This sonnet is a subversion of the original titled “Que contiene una fantasía contenta con amor decente” (“De Amor” 143) (Appendix 1).

connotations.

As soon as she has read the poem, the countess de Paredes enters, dressed in the lawyer's clothes. After the recognition between the countess and Juana follows an exchange of humorous dialogue, loaded with sexual connotations. For example, the tribunal of the *Santo Oficio* is blasphemously called "el tribunal del Santo Orificio" (401). Both friends realize that it is too late for Juana to save herself because she is in the process of being published, and her copyright has been violated. While Lysi tells her to calm down and to reflect quietly, an *off voice* starts expounding the opinions of Paz concerning their relationship. The voice starts with the statement that the majority of biographers would give away all their scholarships and prizes to gaze at what the audience has right before their eyes (401-02).

Octavio Paz, para no ir más cerca, . . . despeja todas las dudas que pudieran caber respecto de la relación decente, casta y pura que existió entre la Excelentísima Sra. Doña María Luisa Manrique de Lara, Condesa de Paredes, Marquesa de la Laguna, y Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz . . . A continuación tendremos la oportunidad de entender el verdadero significado de los términos que utiliza el prístino erudito para explicar esta amistad. (*las dos mujeres se acercan peligrosamente.*) Nótese el safismo sublimado. (*Ahora se besan apasionadamente.*) Vedlas entregadas a las silenciosas orgías de la meditación. Una monja, la otra casada. ¿Qué podrían hacer juntas? (*Sor Juana salta encima de la virreina y ambas se repatingan a sus anchas*). (402)

While the *voice in off* continues talking about a powerful suppressed libido, a symbol of sublimated virility, etc., Juana is filled with inspiration and composes a *romance decasílabo* that she recites to her lover. This poem is made of the first and the fourteenth verse of the original (Appendix 2), with only a few minimal changes.

The *romance* is dedicated to the countess: “Pinta la proporción hermosa de la excelentísima señora condesa de Paredes, con otra de cuidados, elegantes esdrújulos, que aún le remite desde Méjico a su excelencia” (“Romance” 79-81). Rodríguez fictionalizes a dialogue around the erudite words used in this poem and at Lysi’s doubt about the word *émula*, Juana comes up with the substitute *inclita*, which she immediately rejects since “suena parecido a clitoris y luego Octavio va a decir que sí sexuábamos” (402). Finally she decides, “Mejor le voy a poner súcuba (402). All these words are rare and hint at the nun’s high level of education. The words in question are indeed “elegant” *esdrújulas* (*émula*, rival; *inclita*, illustrious, and *súcuba*, a female demon) and the verb *sexuábamos* is a free invention that allows for the formation of yet another one.

Juana reflects on Paz’s possible hermaphroditism or androgyny, which was speculated on by Paz’s biographer Paco Ignacio Taibo III, but she ends her rumination with the words: “Lo que no entiendo es por qué se tienen que meter los biógrafos con la vida íntima de las personas, la vida íntima es sagrada” (403), clearly disapproving the way Paz touches on the subject concerning Sor Juana’s intimate life. As a response she has written a “respuesta a *Las trampas de l’rfe*”, which is a subversion of Sor Juana’s best-known poem, her philosophical satire (Appendix 3) that argues about the men’s inconsequent censure of women (“Sátira” 109). After the first line, “Hombres necios que acusáis a la mujer sin razón” (403), Juana continues her poem, freely adapting it to the fame-seeking Paz and other men. Towards the end she advises: “Dejad de solicitar, y después, con más razón/ para toda la afición os debíerais jubilar” (404).

The last character of the play to appear is *la procuradora*.⁴⁸ She enters singing the *himno panista*, an explicitly intolerant and judgemental piece that starts: “Mueran los jotos, los invidentes,/ las prostitutas, las gentes indecentes/ que quede limpio el mundo de seres inmundos” (404). The theme is the rejection of body and pleasure, which according to the fundamentalist view of the Church and of the right-wing political party PAN are dirty and despicable. The *procuradora* is in cellular phone connection with the “Señor inquisidor” (405). The obviously uneducated, ignorant *procuradora* speaks with an extremely vulgar vocabulary and it is ironic that this woman has the power to condemn the highly regarded Muse. This is a poignant comment on the state of the judicial system at large. The *procuradora* behaves like the stereotypical power-drunk middle-woman, and treats the prisoner with contempt, making her feel inadequate and coercing her. She tells Juana that her *pastorela virtual* is censured and will not be accepted, because of the disrespectful treatment of intimacy, *genitalidad*,⁴⁹ and human reproduction. It is also offensive because of the full nude that would be shown and therefore the *procuradora* declares it an *acto contra natura*. In context, this expression voiced by the reactionary woman certainly refers to homosexuality as well. Furthermore, in the exchange between the superior and the nun the issue of poverty is addressed. The *procuradora* is enraged because Juana allows the poor to speak: “¿Por qué tienen que hablar los pobres? Qué no entiende usted que eso provoca la subversión” (406). For this reason the angry woman qualifies the piece as destabilizing. She cannot understand

⁴⁸*Procuradora* is both a female attorney and the manageress of a nunnery, and in this case the word is used both ways.

⁴⁹*Genitalidad* is a neologism.

why Juana would go back to news from 1995, and because Juana is not up-to-date, the official tells her that Ernesto Zedillo became president in 1994, and how subcomandante Marcos' cause was lost, since by now the government has managed to kill all the Indians in the country, rendering the Zapatista Movement obsolete.

When finally Juana asks what the specific reason is for her condemnation, she receives the following answer: “Usted pone el nacimiento del Mesías en vivo y en directo y eso pertenece a la intimidad de las personas humanas . . . y además incluye en esta escena un desnudo integral con el objeto de atraer público morboso y obtener mejores dividendos” (407). At this point the classic Christmas scene is staged with the Virgin holding the Christ Child. The naked body the *procuradora* has referred to is that of the Baby Jesus, whose image offends because, in her words, “bebé o lo que sea de todos modos le cuelgan sus porquerías” (407). The irony is great when the most natural of states, the nude body of the baby in the arms of his mother, is deemed unnatural. With no further explanation the woman declares it an obscenity. Violently she tears the baby out of the Virgin's arms and stabs him with the folder (*plegadera*) on Juana's desk killing him. Without a break and to the astonishment of the others she continues: “¡Oh! el cadáver de un niño en su escritorio, hermana, y atravesado con su plegadera; hermana, es usted una asesina confesa” (408). When Juana turns to the lawyer and to Lysi for support, the *procuradora* notices the change of clothes, and the lawyer desperately exclaims: “Yo le voy a explicar, estas pinches lesbianas . . .” and “Ya ve como son los homosexuales . . .”, accuses the women of having forced him to swap his clothes. He only has to use the words *lesbianas* and *homosexuales* to have the official on his side, so imperturbable is the bias against otherness in the mentality of the rigid woman. She does not want to hear any of Juana's or Lysi's explanations and

continues: “Así que podemos añadir complicidad y encubrimiento además de estar empujando funcionarios públicos al camino de la prostitución y el travestismo. No señoras, pos ora sí ya se las cargó la Inquisición” (408).

Juana is crying and bids farewell to her beloved friend with the words: “Ser mujer, ni estar ausente, no es de amarte impedimento; pues sabes tú que las almas distancia ignoran y sexo” (409). The *procuradora* labels Juana “enemiga de México”, parodying her honorable title “Fénix de América”, and tells her “dése de santos que la vamos a dejar pudrirse en Almoloya” (409-10). The stark contrast in the register of language between the artist/intellectual and the official prosecutor is the ultimate irony in the play.

The drama ends with the edict of the sacred tribunal, prohibiting the entire work of the nun in any form and condemning Juana to be tortured with the antique instruments that have been expropriated from the school of medicine by the PAN in the interest of the moral and good manners of the country. The *procuradora* speaks in the name of the Partido reAcción Nacional. Juana, in her last prayer, desperately exclaims: “¡Dioses!, ¿y éste es el cambio democrático que esperábamos? . . . Pobre de México en manos del PAN y no el pan en las manos de México. La peor tortura es haber perdido la esperanza” (410). The evocation of gods in the mouth of a nun is ominous. Rodríguez’s Sor Juana has been pushed to the limit and since she has been abandoned by her faith represented by the fundamentalist prosecutor, she has the freedom to resort to the indigenous belief system, something the historic figure was not able to do. The ending is the loss of hope for a better future. Rodríguez plays one more time with the words when she cleverly uses the acronym for the conservative party PAN as actual bread, and so instead of providing bread for the people, the people end up in the hands of the PAN.

Juana, like the historical nun, is silenced, and left to die in her cell.

Rodríguez's parting shot is a series of one-line opinions, offered by some of the national authorities past and present. Their comments, each reflecting its owner's idiosyncrasy, are presented in an order of degenerating register that shows Rodríguez's views on the national political climate, from Salinas' "Ya se los había dicho, esa monja es una corrupta" to Fidel Velázquez's⁵⁰ "¡Jija!" (411). José López Portillo, president from 1976 to 82 exclaims: "¡Ya vistas (sic) Margarita!" (411) directing his words to his sister Margarita, who during his presidency discovered the remains of the Jeronymite nun in the Claustro de San Jerónimo.

The *pastorela virtual* is fearlessly irreverent. The political and the intellectual parody are extreme and the feeling of indignation is strong. Written in 1995, but fictionalized as being in 2000, the play evidences the keenness of Rodríguez's political foresight because the prophesy of the PAN's victory has come true. What has not happened is the liberation of Raúl Salinas, who is still serving his sentence in Almoloyita. Carlos Salinas has not returned to Mexico except for short and secretive visits, but some Mexicans expect that by the start of the new six-year cycle with the presidency of Vicente Fox, he will be back.

In her play Rodríguez draws parallels between past and present to emphasize the persistence of corruption, sexism, and homophobia in an attempt to awaken reaction in her audience. *Sor Juana en Almoloya* is part of a provocative body of work that exemplifies the attitude of women, who are actively struggling to revise long-standing myths and versions of history that are only that, mere versions.

⁵⁰Fidel Velázquez was a powerful leader of the Mexican unions.

New knowledge keeps surfacing and recently Alessandra Luiselli wrote in the *Latin American Theatre Review*:

El final de Sor Juana fue realmente un final de conjuración masculina en su contra, efectuada esta confabulación por tres preladados de la Iglesia que determinaron su trágico renunciamiento a las letras y, en última instancia, su muerte: el Arzobispo de México, Francisco Aguiar y Seijas, el propio confesor de Sor Juana, el padre Antonio Núñez de Miranda, y el Obispo de Puebla, Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz. Gracias a las investigaciones del historiador Elías Trabulse hoy, al final del siglo veinte, ha podido comprobarse que durante los años de 1693-1694 se dictó un proceso episcopal secreto en contra de Sor Juana, proceso que concluyó exigiéndosele su abjuración a las letras. Este determinante dato pone punto final a las especulaciones respecto a la “conversión final” de la inteligente jerónima, quien un año después del proceso dictado en su contra murió en el convento de San Jerónimo de la ciudad de México. (17-18)

This recent piece in the puzzle will certainly create a wave of scholarly research and shed new light on the phenomenon called Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz.

Conclusion

In Mexico a shift of consciousness moving from male dominance into a more egalitarian and inclusive form of coexistence is being promoted by a growing number of men and women. Their goal is to remove the old entrenched patriarchy and substitute it with a paradigm that will allow everyone to contribute to a more balanced and healthier society. To accomplish this high objective, corruption and inequality have to be uncovered and eradicated so that new ways of coming together can be found.

Jesusa Rodríguez is one of these individuals who are trying to bring about some change. She uses her creativity and imagination and puts it to work on the stage where she can reach the members of the audience who want to be entertained, but are also willing to listen to the artist's message and at times get uncomfortable, when the attacks on politics and society extend to their own lives. In her plays Rodríguez deconstructs and revises the official story and comes up with new versions of old myths and stagnated beliefs. She renders the evolution of consciousness particularly well in her depiction and interpretation of the three female figures Coatlicue, goddess of the earth, La Malinche, mother of the Mexican nation, and Sor Juana, erudite nun of the seventeenth century. By choosing these icons she makes a statement that conveys the importance of looking at Mexico's own mythical roots as well as at the female figures who have come before and left their mark in history. By accessing archetypal figures Rodríguez potentiates her message because she speaks to the inner core of everyone. She has the talent to move contemporary audiences with old myths and historic facts by making these themes understandable and relevant to the present experience of the people and the country.

Her theatre is a continuation of a long-standing Mexican tradition. She picks up genres and themes of the past and develops them into new versions of the old. She revives myths and combines them with current events in an utterly parodic fashion. In this way she can say things that would in another context be impossible to express. Because her message is clad in entertainment clothing, she gets away with irreverence, blasphemy, and, at times, extremely grotesque humour.

Rodríguez is effective because she understands her role as an elder, who is knowledgeable and clever. Her sketches are like rituals that she performs before an audience that is transfixed by her repartee and insolence. The setting, her own theatrical space, and the length of her performances add to a well balanced experience, that satisfies the audience to the point that it has enough but is ready to come back for more.

Rodríguez's fierceness and explosive nature and the frontal attacks that she makes against her so-called enemies (the government, the Church, and the media) make it clear that she would not fit into the commercial theatre scene. To spread her message she needs a unique space where she is safe and free of censorship. As she becomes more popular she is venturing into different venues and only time will tell how this development will continue.

She uses the word alchemy when she talks about her particular mix of cabaret theatre, where romantic and nostalgic elements are combined with mythical and sacred ones to show what she perceives as an ever-present chaos in the world. Cabaret is an art form that encompasses seriousness and lightness, high culture and pop culture. Cruelty and filth are represented in a hilarious fashion, imitating the actual absurdity of Mexican reality. As a successor of famous Mexican cabaretists and comics like Cantinflas and Palillo, whose genre she has helped to revitalize, she

is always walking on the edge. For Rodríguez art can never be conventional. It is in its essence opposed to the establishment. Her work is a tool that helps her to remind her audience of uncomfortable truths that would rather be forgotten. There is a need to bridge the huge gap that exists between the classes in Mexico, and Rodríguez offers the possibility to understand more about the high-scale corruption in Mexican politics and points to the need of solidarity among Mexicans. She urges them to recognize the precariousness of their situation and the necessity of doing something about it. With humour she manages to involve everyone, so that no one can be a bystander without feeling somehow responsible.

Although Jesusa Rodríguez is becoming more and more influential in the Mexican performance world, she is nevertheless very controversial. There is a bitterness and anger inside her that shows in her abrasiveness and her merciless commentary on many issues. At times one must ask if Rodríguez actually believes that she might become one of the icons she represents. The use of her actual name on stage in *Cielo de abajo* to emulate the birth of a new Messiah, a female Jesus born from Coatlicue is astonishingly inventive, yet at the same time quite presumptuous. One must hope that fame will not taint her creativity. Her volcanic nature could eventually hurt her, as it probably has already hurt others. As long as she keeps at task with the awakening of the dormant power of the female in Mexican society she is a positive contributor to the present shift in consciousness.

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Appendix 1

Soneto 165

Detente, sombra

Detente, sombra de mi bien esquivo,
imagen del hechizo que más quiero,
bella ilusión por quien alegre muero,
dulce ficción por quien penosa vivo.

Si al imán de tus gracias, atractivo,
sirve mi pecho de obediente acero,
¿para qué me enamoras lisonjero
si has de burlarme luego fugitivo?

Mas blasonar no puedes, satisfecho,
de que triunfa de mí tu tiranía:
que aunque dejas burlado el lazo estrecho

que tu forma fantástica ceñía,
poco importa burlar brazos y pecho
si te labra prisión mi fantasía.

Appendix 2

Romance decasílabo

61

Lámina sirva el Cielo

Lámina sirva el Cielo al retrato,
Lísida, de tu angélica forma:
cálamos forme el Sol de sus luces;
sílabas las estrellas compongan.

Cúmulo de primores tu talle,
dóricas esculturas asombra:
jónicos lineamientos desprecia,
émula su labor de sí propia.

Appendix 3

Sátira filosófica

92

Hombres necios que acusáis

Hombres necios que acusáis
a la mujer sin razón,
sin ver que sois la ocasión
de lo mismo que culpáis:

si con ansia sin igual
solicitáis su desdén,
¿por qué queréis que obren bien
si las incitáis al mal?

Combatís su resistencia
y luego, con gravedad,
decís que fue liviandad
lo que hizo la diligencia.

Parecer quiere el denuedo
de vuestro parecer loco,
al niño que pone el coco
y luego le tiene miedo.

Queréis, con presunción necia,
hallar a la que buscáis,
para pretendida, Thais,
y en la posesión, Lucrecia.

¿Qué humor puede ser más raro
que el que, falto de consejo,
él mismo empaña el espejo,
y siente que no esté claro?

Con el favor y el desdén
tenéis condición igual,
quejándoos, si os tratan mal,
burlándoos, si os quieren bien.

Opinión, ninguna gana;
pues la que más se recata,
si no os admite, es ingrata,
y si os admite, es liviana.

Siempre tan necios andáis
que, con desigual nivel,
a una culpáis por cruel
y a otra por fácil culpáis.

¿Pues cómo ha de estar templada
la que vuestro amor pretende,
si la que es ingrata, ofende,
y la que es fácil, enfada?

Mas, entre el enfado y pena
que vuestro gusto refiere,
bien haya la que no os quiere
y quejáos en hora buena.

Dan vuestras amantes penas
a sus libertades alas,
y después de hacerlas malas
las queréis hallar muy buenas.

¿Cuál mayor culpa ha tenido
en una pasión errada:
la que cae de rogada,
o el que ruega de caído?

¿O cuál es más de culpar,
aunque cualquiera mal haga:
la que peca por la paga,
o el que paga por pecar?

Pues, ¿para qué os espantáis
de la culpa que tenéis?
Queredlas cual las hacéis
o hacedlas cual las buscáis.

Dejad de solicitar,
y después, con más razón,
acusaréis la afición
de la que os fuere a rogar.

Bien con muchas armas fundo
que lidia vuestra arrogancia,
pues en promesa e instancia
juntáis diablo, carne y mundo.

VITA

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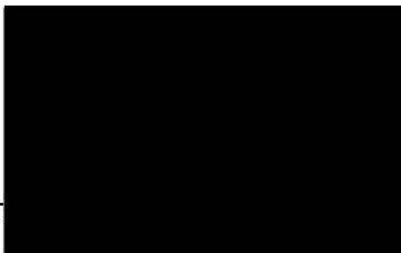
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Jesusa Rodríguez and Her Cabaret Theatre

Author



Gabriela Wieland McBee

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