

GENERAL SECTION



Articles

The Poor and the Modern City: Recognition and Misrecognition of the *Carpas* Shows in Mexico City (1890–1930)

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As the turn of the twentieth century approached, the Mexican government led by Porfirio Díaz increased efforts to modernize the capital city. Between the years of 1881 and 1900, city officers changed the street's allegorical names into numerals, a nomenclature intended to showcase Mexico's progress.¹ The new uses of the public space suddenly transformed the city dwellers' relationship with the metropolis they inhabited. In 1900, the municipal council of Mexico City gave orders to re-structure the street plan to favor the emerging automobile. Officers therefore limited the use of public spaces in the city center for traditional forms of entertainment in order to avoid the presence of what they viewed as obstacles in the streets. As a 1922 motion specified: "Con el fin de que en lo sucesivo no se establezcan obstáculos en las calles de la ciudad por lo que respecta a diversiones . . . Queda prohibido terminantemente que en las calles de la ciudad se establezcan jacalones y pabellones de caballitos de cualquiera clase que sean."² One police officer requested clarification by asking: "Si la medida se refiere a las calles únicamente o se ha querido comprender en ella las plazuelas y si la limitación se pretende sólo para caballitos, o para toda clase de jacalones y tiendas de lona sea cual fuere la diversión que en ellos se establezca."³ This officer's question shows his concern for the spatial displacement of the *carpas* or *jacalones de zarzuela*, small itinerant variety theaters that offered a diversity of musical entertainment such as vaudeville, zarzuelas, and Spanish couplets along with Latin American, Caribbean and traditional Mexican music. Juan Bribiesca, the Director of the Public Entertainment Office, responded to the officer explaining that, "Para las plazas, los permisos

permanecen como es costumbre.”⁴ In addition, Bribiesca argued that these centers were an entertainment activity convenient for all social classes, and especially important to those who, as he saw it, would otherwise get drunk or commit crimes, stating:

[Juzgo] no solamente necesario el que se proporcione toda clase de facilidades para el establecimiento de diversiones públicas, sino que cre[o] que se hace imperiosa *la necesidad de existencia de estos centros de reunión adecuada a todas las clases sociales*; pues para muchos es un momento de solaz y de descanso de su trabajo diario, el tener algo con que divertirse, con que entretenerse en alguno de estos teatros, de estos jacalones, o de esa tienda de lona, y *para otros es el momento de apartarse de distraerse bien de la embriaguez o de los riñas y hasta de los delitos* (graves).⁵

Bribiesca’s defense of the *carpas de barrio* reveals that despite their perceived unpleasant appearance, these theaters were allowed to remain in the streets and plazas due to the authorities’ belief in the shows’ “civilizing effect,” especially on those that they thought would otherwise fight or get drunk. These unjustified assumptions led inspectors to associate the *carpas* with the lower classes based on what I claim was a class prejudice that resulted from the long lasting effects of the racist social order in Mexico imposed during the colonial period. In this paper, I study the development of the *carpas* shows to inquire how the local authorities utilized arguments to protect the urban space against those they imagined and constructed as “the poor.” Since authorities used these arguments to create laws to regulate public space, they caused alterations to common understandings of what said public space meant as much as it determined who was entitled to use it and to what ends. I argue that these conflicts were not so much about space as they were symbolic mechanisms used to classify people. Despite the fact that officers initially acknowledged that “all social classes” frequented the *carpas*, in the laws that they issued to control them, they insisted on their prejudiced perception that these shows would serve to keep the low classes away from crime. Beyond this symbolic implication, I discuss its material effects: as the spatial regulation of these theaters served to grant public access to certain people while denying it to others, they contributed to materially

segregate people, thus assisting inter-subjective processes of formation of social class. By analyzing the dialogues in legal documents between the state and citizens, I show how the elites and the people of the carpas internalized their respectively superior and subordinated class positions as if they were natural.

As Bribiesca's words illustrate, the recognition of the popularity of these shows was accompanied by the *misrecognition* of the people that frequented them. By misrecognition I refer to the ways of knowing whereby the acknowledgment of a certain social group is based on falsities or simply stereotypes that work for the benefit of more powerful groups. Taking recourse on the theory of recognition proposed by Nancy Fraser (2003), I approach the problem of inter-subjective processes of social classification, specifically social status, according to the criteria of social class, and I also address the dilemmas that arise from the question of who is entitled to use what public spaces and to what ends.

Fraser has also explained how prejudice is used to issue laws, arising from entrenched patterns of cultural value which, when institutionalized, legitimize the resulting social hierarchies thus obscuring their arbitrariness. The far-reaching effect, as Fraser states, is the establishment of a "single fixed, all-encompassing status hierarchy" (55). As I will illustrate in this paper, this hierarchy had notable effects in all aspects of public life and differential experiences of the social sphere and urban space in Mexico City.

My understanding of "social classification" is informed by the work of postcolonial critic Aníbal Quijano and by his reshaping of the term modernity instead as modernity/coloniality. Quijano has argued that modernity is only conceivable at the expense of coloniality. One of the most devastating costs of this process has been the articulation of what he calls, the 'coloniality of power' (Quijano 2000 and 2007, 2007b). This structure of power has articulated race, labor, space, and peoples, according to the needs of capital and for the benefit of white, Europeanized culture. This structure of power has naturalized white culture's European superiority as much as it has justified the classification of people into the dichotomies of inferior and superior, primitive and civilized, and traditional and modern, taking European culture as the normative reference. These categories respond not only, and not necessarily, to the phenotypic features of a culture's practitioners, but mainly to the cultural traits with which these people have been associated since the sixteenth century. In this paper, I characterize this social

trait to classify people as a remnant of colonial (and racist) modes of social organization (Quijano 2000, 2007, 2007b) and their lingering effects in early twentieth century Mexico City.

The early carpas scene took place between 1890 and 1930. It is contemporaneous to three different moments in the project of Mexican nation formation: the late Porfirian regime (1874-1910), the Revolution (1910-1920), and the post-Revolutionary governments (1920-1950). After a century of harsh political distress, the long lasting government of Porfirio Díaz brought some political stability. In order to obtain international recognition and respect, President Díaz and his officers accommodated public policies to comply with the demands of the modernization process. Following a historicist model of progress, nation builders aspired to transform Mexico into what they thought would become a “civilized country,” making this cause their *raison d’etat*. They believed that the progress resulting from capitalism was the only feasible means whereby Mexico would be internationally acknowledged as a country capable of independence. Accordingly, the approaching celebrations of the Centennial of Independence in 1910 gave the government a suitable occasion to showcase Mexico’s economic success and political maturity. As architecture historians have documented, Mexican urban planners designed and built new monuments, parks, and theaters predominantly following French models of architecture (Davis 2005, Fernández Christlieb 1998, Moya Gutiérrez 2012). Foreign entrepreneurs invested in new establishments such as retail stores to promote the recently introduced lines of credit. As early as 1883, a city directory, depicted as a map, showed only the commercial profile of the metropolis while omitting all buildings or spaces that did not serve this purpose. Therefore, the directory clearly showed how notions of space were altered to suit the economic interests of the state.

As part of the reverie of the elites and the ruling classes, this map contributed to perceive, imagine, and experience the city in a way that was more suitable to the ongoing economic and ideological changes. Ángel Rama has argued that cartographic representations are “operative cultural models” that, through signs, insert the ideologies and cultural values organizing the perception of the reality, thus creating it (22-23). Furthermore, because maps also reflect someone’s desire, they are instruments of power. This imaginary, I will explain, had relevant effects on the resulting measures to control public space and on how such measures intersected with the development of the carpas shows.

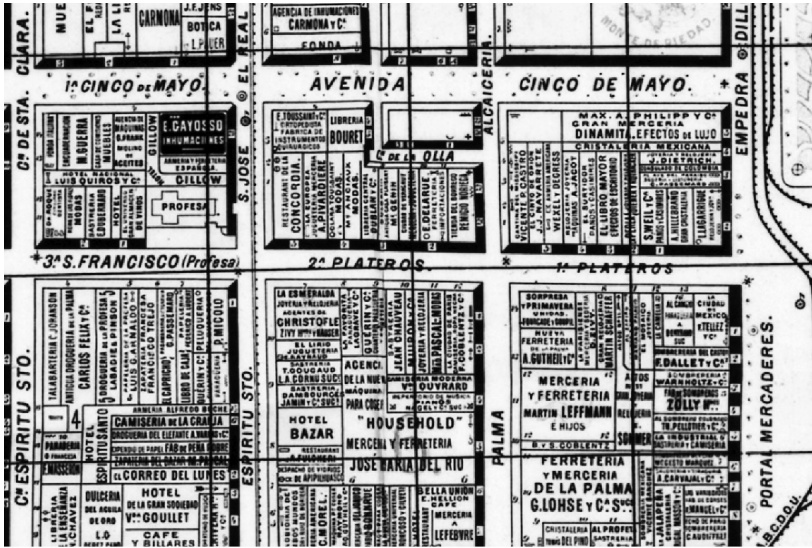


Fig. 1. “Directorio Comercial de la Ciudad de México.” Detail. In: Popper Ferry, Julio. *Directorio Comercial de la Ciudad de México*. Mexico D.F.: 1883. Planoteca del INAH- 0708-090.

The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) disabled any attempts for urban planning. Official control receded during the years of war, and both carpas shows and the politically charged *revistas musicales* flourished in the streets and in formal theaters respectively. With the rise of president Álvaro Obregón in 1920, the country regained political stability and the government resumed the modernizing project aimed to urbanize Mexico City. In the 1920’s the city council’s officers extended their control over the carpas to include their appearance, musical repertory, and even the behavior of their audiences.⁶ The enforcement of the *Reglamento de Diversiones Públicas* and the 1922 sanctions to the carpa María Conesa for its damaged appearance are two such cases:

La carpa María Conesa se encuentra en malas condiciones, pues su techo tiene grandes roturas y en lo general la lona está podrida . . . Aunque esta Carpa está situada en un barrio sucio de la ciudad, su mal aspecto sin embargo resalta y desdice mucho de lo que deben ser estos centros de diversiones . . . pido a esa superioridad que sea clausurada inmediatamente porque aparte de que el público que concurre a dicha carpa sufre las consecuencias, es también un atentado para el ornamento público.⁷

The mentioning of the rotten tent and overall bad shape of this carpa sheds light on some of the aesthetic concerns that these humble theaters provoked among authorities. The palliative clarification, “although it is in a dirty *barrio* of the city,” suggests that if such *jacalones* were far from the downtown area, they were perceived to be less offensive. However, even far from the city center, the carpa María Conesa seems to have been a source of conflict between inspectors and carpa-managers. The officer’s request for its immediate closure shows that his concern for the aspect of the carpas is placed above his concern for the audience: the damage to “public ornamentation” comes before the safety and comfort of the public.

My examination of documents such as historical maps, installation permits, and oral histories confirms that authorities implemented a process they called the “ordering” (*ordenamiento*) of the downtown area, which gradually displaced these *jacalones de zarzuela* to what at the time were the peripheral streets of the city in order to hide their outrageous appearances.⁸ Carpa theatres thus moved to barrios located northwest of the central area, such as Tepito, Santa María La Redonda, and La Lagunilla, in neighborhoods that during these years were the periphery of Mexico City at large. Nonetheless, during the 1920’s, permissions to install these theaters continued and even increased. As the inspector quoted above presumed, authorities were convinced that this was an effective way “to keep the lower classes away from crime.” This shows how authorities ignored their previous remark that these were spectacles for all social classes.

To combat the carpas’ ugliness, one inspector proposed to enforce carpa managers to acquire circus tents from the United States and use them “as models for this kind of business,” for he believed they were “much more suitable.” In this 1922 report, he voices his assumption that these shows were “for the low classes,” a shift revealing the changing ways by which the authorities began to perceive the carpas’ audiences as “the poor,” thus mapping vice and ill behavior to the carpas shows and their people:

El público que asiste a estos espectáculos es en general de la clase baja del pueblo, y pagan por permanecer dos o tres horas en dichas carpas cuotas sumamente bajas, (por ende) hay que buscar un medio de que no desaparezcan esta clase de espectáculos, pues es siempre preferible la carpa a

la pulquería y la taberna, donde con absoluta seguridad pagan más y se embrutecen más . . . En vista pues de las anteriores consideraciones, me parece sumamente acertada la idea [. . . de] que se encargara una carpa de las mejores y más bien acondicionadas que se producen en los Estados Unidos y convenientemente establecida en algún sitio de la Capital, [sic] sirviera de modelo.⁹

Fascination with European and North American cities continued after the Revolution. However, in order to mark the political start of a new century, a clear breakage was necessary. The new governors distanced themselves from the old Porfirian regime by negating its constrictive morality and adopting more liberal moral views. This resulted in clear contradictions in the regulation of policies for public entertainment. Inspectors welcomed two of the carpas' best-known and most ill-reputed varieties, *género ínfimo* and *sicalípsis* (or *espectáculo psicalíptico*), with unprecedented leniency. The alluring nature of these shows diverted official concern from the carpas' appearances and drew attention to their musical repertory. The *género ínfimo* was a one-act zarzuela, and *psicalípsis* was an erotic version of *género ínfimo*, known for its distinctive piquant lyrics and voluptuous short-haired female performers. As Ann Rubenstein has explained, these women were a local adaptation of flappers who defied pre-established norms of acceptable female behavior. The short duration and mundane topics of these genres merited them the nickname *teatro frívolo* (frivolous theater), as well as the disdain of educated music critics who lamented what they called the degeneration of the zarzuela. In their bitter reviews, they described the *teatro frívolo* as "monotonous, absurd, and shameful" and considered it to be "a degeneration."¹⁰ However, the inspectors showed more laxity and, despite the bad reputation of these shows, they tolerated them, only negotiating a stricter control to avoid the attendance of honorable women and adolescent boys.¹¹ Carpa theaters that offered this sort of entertainment were called *Teatros de tolerancia* (tolerance theaters), or *Teatros para hombres solos* (theaters for men alone). Ostensibly, carpa managers had convinced inspectors to allow these shows by persuasively maintaining that their licentiousness endowed the city with a more cosmopolitan appeal. The following requests from carpa managers in 1914 illustrate these claims:

El creciente adelanto de la civilización trae aparejada la necesidad de espectáculos de este género y nada extraño debe parecernos su existencia y desarrollo, pero sí se impone su reglamentación prudente y adecuada . . . Los espectáculos de tolerancia . . . podrían representar la válvula reguladora de las pasiones . . . si se atiende a que limitando la asistencia a estos teatros solo para hombres, se podrá llevar al escenario lo mismo la película procaz que el baile al desnudo, el couplet picante y picarezco, el voudeville insinuante, la mueca intencionada y para esto será suficiente proscribir [la asistencia de] señoras y menores de ambos sexos, *exhibiciones en teatros céntricos*, y además que estas representaciones sean a horas avanzadas, suponiendo las 10pm. En adelante; todo bajo el concepto de establecer severas penas para las infracciones.¹²

Recognizing the governors' aspiration to transform Mexico City into a metropolis of international acclaim, the above solicitant stated that these shows "were a result of the progress of civilization" and that their presence in Mexico would "elevate" the city to the standards of other major cities in Europe and North America. Interestingly, another carpa manager also seemed to have already internalized the official boundaries of morality. Not only did he agree to be closely supervised, but also to settle his theaters far from downtown where "they would not harm anybody's feelings." In 1921 he states:

El suscrito . . . comparece exponiendo: que deseando implantar en México un espectáculo a la altura de los de Berlín, Viena, Paris, New York, Habana, etc. o lo que es lo mismo, un teatro y cine libres, desea se le conceda permiso para esto: pero como quiera que algunas personas timoratas se podían llamar a perjudicadas por considerar el espectáculo un poco inmoral, aun cuando hoy existen espectáculos que no tienen nada que desear a los establecidos en otros países con el nombre de Teatros para Hombres solos, y que actualmente existen en el centro de la ciudad, se compromete a ponerlo en un lugar lejano y donde no pueda herir los sentimientos de nadie.¹³

Due to the reigning chaos during the years of the Revolution, official control of the *carpas* receded, and both musical varieties at the *carpas* shows and the politically charged *revistas musicales* proliferated in formal and street theaters. Mexico reached a period of relative peace in 1920. Because the Revolution had been advanced by the poorest social sectors in the country, the visibility of peasants and workers increased in the city. The new ruling classes therefore felt an ineluctable sense of obligation with the people that had put them into power. As a result, the post-revolutionary government had to face a political conundrum: facilitating the coexistence of the urban working class and the elites within the vicinity of downtown while continuing the modernization project.

Seemingly, the anxieties generated from what the elites considered to be the vulgarization of culture inspired the creation of the *Consejo Cultural y Artístico* in the first year of Álvaro Obregón's presidency (1920-24). Miguel Alonzo Romero, the city's mayor, and Miguel Lerdo de Tejada, composer and chief of the Office of Public Entertainment, concocted the creation of this council whose members, as Alonzo assessed, were the most apt and highly educated intellectuals working for the benefit of urban culture (Alonzo 109). On February 23, the morning after the official inauguration of this group, the newspaper *El Nacional* published a note proclaiming the organization's "highly civilizing goals," declaring: "Ayer se efectuó la instalación solemne de la Inspección Cultural Artística, creada por el H. Ayuntamiento con los fines *altamente civilizados* de que oportunamente dimos cuenta" (Alonzo 109). During this event, Miguel Alonzo Romero gave a speech whose initial words stated: "De hoy en adelante, el Cabildo metropolitano que me honro en presidir, os arma cruzados de la belleza. Vosotros conocéis perfectamente el camino, vosotros seréis de hoy en más, los responsables de una obra de purificación." (115). I see the long lasting traces of the colonial mentality in the anachronistic style of this discourse, as I explain below.

Inspired by the work of Enrique Dussel, José Subirats has analyzed the chivalrous writing style adopted by the first conquerors to talk about their victories in the Americas (63-126). Subirats has claimed that the medieval literary style of the crusaders in poems such as *Cantares del Mío Cid*, *La Najerense* or *Liber Regum* was extended to the first conquerors in works such as *Cartas de relación* by Hernán Cortes or *Historia general de las cosas de la Nueva España*

by Bernardino de Sahagún. The main goal of this rhetorical style was to monumentalize the conquerors' battles as well as the warriors who made them possible. In this way, Subirats claims that "the heroic virtues of the warrior [crusader] were the necessary condition, by natural and divine right, of the legitimacy of the war, occupation and extermination against those whom that same heroic principle would stigmatize as the radically negative: those in state of nature and gentleness, barbarism and sin, in other words the native Indian" (67).

Similarly, decolonial philosopher Néstor Maldonado-Torres has extended Dussel's ideas into the realm of inter-subjectivity, explaining that the "ego conquiro"—a form of subjectivity that is grounded on the certainty of the self as a conqueror—depends on the constitution it makes of an inferior other. In this case, says Maldonado Torres, "the ego conquiro is not questioned, but rather provides the ground for articulation of the ego cogito. Dussel suggests as much: 'The barbarian' was the obligatory context of all reflection on subjectivity, reason, the cogito" (245).

By entitling—or as he says "enarming"—the members of this *cruzados de la belleza* (the crusaders of beauty) council, Alonzo evokes the medieval imaginaries of war that inspired the colonizing process in the sixteenth century. Simultaneously, he configures a barbaric Other by criticizing the cultures he considers to be alien, or at least illegitimate. A full quotation of Alonzo's speech further demonstrates this and suggests that his fears of losing jurisdiction over downtown motivated his combative tone:

Los legados de la época colonial, allí están convertidos en cafés, en expendios de baratijas, en amenos rincones de necedad y de flirt, donde las damiselas de ojos alborotados de rimel expían las concupiscencias de los jóvenes fifís; esos legados, ahí están esperando la mano piadosa que los salve de los detentadores del arte . . . En el teatro, ¿no estamos tolerando todavía esas monsergas imposibles, esos actos de mal acrobatismo, ese torturante desfile de mujeres histéricas y pintarrajeadas, que exhiben sus desnudeces famélicas al compás de las mismas soserías musicales? ¿No estamos tolerando eso que se llama nuestro teatro vernáculo y que, si acaso, es nuestra vernácula vergüenza? - Qué belleza encierran esas revistas en las que, al son de las eternas rumbas

antillanas, los hombres y las mujeres cambian sonrisas idiotas, en medio de *contorsiones ridículas*?-Quizá la música es de nuestras artes la menos pisoteada; quizá la más ennoblecida en manos de los Ogazón, de los Castillo, de los Moctezuma, de los Carrillo, de los Ponce, de los Barajas, etc. - Y precisamente para que los horrendos palurdos de este siglo, que se nutren con pulque y enchiladas en sus días de campo, sobre la belleza de nuestros monumentos, no sigan manchándolos con su presencia intolerable; precisamente para que las obras hermosas que la arquitectura colonial nos legó, no sean convertidas en bazares de necesidad y de lujuria enguantada en seda; precisamente para que el *monorritmo torturante* de esas revistas en que desfilan los mismos gendarmes, los mismos políticos, los mismos danzones y las mismas rumbas, no sigan torturándonos . . . precisamente para eso, os hemos convocado (Alonzo Romero 115).

Both Subirats and Maldonado-Torres' arguments clearly resonate with Dussel's claim for the existence of the "ego conquiro" as a subjective condition—a superiority complex arising from the conviction that European culture is ontologically better—present in colonized cultures. Yet both Subirats and Maldonado-Torres diagnose the lingering effects of this social ill in postcolonial times. In the above quote, Alonzo Romero manifests great preoccupation about the musical practices performed around the buildings he calls "the legacy of the colonial period." Presumably, what is at stake in his criticism of vernacular musical theater is less a matter of musical quality or taste, and more an issue of the utilization of public spaces—namely Spanish buildings—by the people that, in his opinion, legitimately deserved to use them. His prejudice against the music performed in these spaces leads him to consider these people to be usurpers of these architectural legacies. Therefore, he feels compelled and naturally entitled to reclaim them. Accordingly, Alonzo seeks to consolidate his own self as "superior," and for this reason his discourse can be seen as a performative act through which he configures an inferior otherness. My contention is that Alonzo characterizes these people in terms of what he believes is a less refined musical, artistic and even gastronomical taste. Through this symbolic gesture he otherizes the lower classes and

portrays himself and his cohort as the true salvation for the vulgarity that threatens Mexico City and its colonial architecture. Resembling the colonial argument of saving souls through religious crusades, mayor Alonzo expresses his desire to rescue the city from those he sees as new barbarians. Yet the maneuver is not completed through direct references to the race of those he rants about, but rather about the cultures these people practice.

Seemingly, greater visibility in the downtown area of the musical and other practices (that were not typically connected to the elites) awoke the letrados' anxieties for what they considered to be the vulgarization of culture. Alonzo Romero's disapproval of eating *enchiladas* and drinking *pulque* in these spaces is intentional, since both were traditional gastronomic customs of the local people whom he calls "the horrendous hicks of this century." He openly declares that their presence annoys him, for he believes "they stain the beauty of our buildings." Furthermore, his deprecating reproach to the *fifís*, the damsels with their sparkling mascara-lined eyes and silk gloves, discloses his fear of those he sees as *nouveau riches*, in other words, those who, after the Revolution, occupied the social place once granted to the Europeanized Porfirian bourgeoisie. He refers to the *revista musical* as monotonous (mono-rítmica) and tortuous and, by extension, he discredits those who enjoy it or who dance Antillean rumbas and danzones, originally afro-Caribbean genres. Skillfully, Alonzo Romero deploys his knowledge of some Mexican Europeanized conservatory composers—Ogazón, Castillo, Moctezuma, Carrillo, Ponce, Barajas—in what I view as an attempt to use his musical taste (a trait of social distinction) to place himself in an upper social position granted by his proximity to conservatory culture. This serves to legitimize his cohort and himself as the authentic heirs of European heritage, as if somehow partaking in Europeanized culture placed them in a superior condition not only socially or materially but, most significantly, ontologically. Conveniently, he fails to acknowledge that both the *género ínfimo* and the *revista musical* that he so harshly criticizes were also musical legacies of the colonial period, and that they were clearly influenced and infused with musical genres of African and native Mexican descent.

While the idea of civilization through Christianity was heralded by the conquerors in the sixteenth century to justify the despoiling and genocide of the American continent and its people, in nineteenth century Mexico the idea of progress was invoked to justify the control of

the city and the jurisdiction of its public space. Not coincidentally, the *Reglamento de Diversiones públicas*, issued in 1922 and amended in 1923, reminded people of the behavior that corresponded with a “civilized audience” (Article 110). Accordingly, notions of art, hygiene, and culture based on European standards were connected to justify the segregation that was done in the name of progress. As a result, The Council of Culture embarked on a battle to recuperate the city and its architectural treasures by denying access to people they considered to be “shameful.” In 1922, the council elected diplomat and playwright Federico Gamboa as their president. Six months later, in the name of Art and Culture, Gamboa presented the following request: “En la sesión ordinaria celebrada ayer . . . la asamblea aprobó que [se den órdenes estrictas] para *evitar que los mendigos, harapientos y vergonzantes, circulen por el centro de la ciudad.*”¹⁴

As these examples show, while the geographic displacement of the carpas was justified on the grounds of social class, it was the musical and even gastronomic cultures they fostered that provided the grounds for discrimination. The appearance of the theaters, the musical taste of the audiences, their bodily responses to the music, and even their eating habits were questioned as potential indicators of “lack of civility,” thus compromising the modernity that Mexican governors aspired to attain. The twentieth century modernization project displaced the traditional carpas performances to the margins of the city because the elites considered the practices of sociability cultivated in these theaters to be unworthy of the architecturally privileged spaces. As Alonzo’s discourse illustrates, the pernicious effects of his prejudice caused the elites to characterize certain eating habits, uses of the body, and music and dances as “hick practices,” “ridiculous contortions” or, in more innocuous cases, simply “poor imitations,” and to place them below the line of what they considered civilized. The effects of this lingering colonial structure of power are also evident in Alonzo and Gamboa’s negative uses of universalizing notions of European art. It was thus, in the name of art, architecture, or music, that the members of the Council justified the displacement of people whose musical practices they considered uncivilized, regardless of the cultural origins of this music or the people who actually practiced them.

Despite the pejorative characterizations given by music critics of the time and by musicologists of later years, the popularity of the *género ínfimo* was not undermined. Paradoxically, it was this

“degenerate genre” that served as an index of the modern. The process of modernization, articulated through the notion of civilization, confronted the ruling class with blatant contradictions: while they thought the carpa theaters were disastrous and shameful, they also believed in their power to contain the destructive tendencies of the poor. Similarly, while they thought that the *género ínfimo* was prosaic and mundane, they also believed that it mitigated the strict morality of the nineteenth century, thus laying the groundwork for a more cosmopolitan and modern city. As contradictory as these measures appear, they are historically accountable as the harmful remnants of the diehard colonial structures of power whose lingering effects lasted through the foundation of the modern Mexican state after the Revolution. These contradictions provided the framework by which the City’s authorities characterized not only the music performed at the carpas but, first and foremost, the people in them (a characterization which included both performers and audiences).

As I have argued above, in the case of nineteenth century Mexican postcolonial society, the norms that determined the elaboration of such frames were deeply engrained in the racial prejudice through which Mexican colonial social life was organized beginning in the sixteenth century (Grosfoguel 2011, Maldonado-Torres 2007). This long-standing racial prejudice lingered after independence, thus contributing to the perpetuation of the disadvantageous structural position and as well as the dispossession of certain ethnic groups (their cultures included). As a result, elaborations of notions of social class around the carpas were not only grounded in material dispossession, but intrinsically linked to cultural habits associated with notions of race (black) and ethnicity (indigenous) via musical cultures (rumbas, danzones) or eating habits (enchiladas and pulque), even if they were performed by mestizos or simply by people who did not claim any ethnic allegiance. As Alonzo’s ideas illustrate, such racist cultural prejudice inherited from the early colonial period continued to be symbolically used to socially classify people and locate them below an imaginary, but no less pernicious, line of civilization.

Since identity formation is possible due to the contrast of oppositional features that establish similarities and differences, in the eyes of the nineteenth century Mexican elites (officers who still lingered in the twentieth century government), the ontology of the poor as opposed to the wealthy would be mediated by notions of taste and refinement,

whereby the norm was European cultural traits. In order to have “good taste” (Europeanized taste), it is indispensable that others do not have it. Therefore, the lack of refinement that the elites projected onto the carpas community provided the imaginary of the incivility and the precariousness that they needed to see in their antagonistic otherness. This helped members of the elite to nurture a superior image of themselves. Similarly, the notion of the modern subject was opposed to those lives that were considered to be primitive or backwards due to their preservation of non-European cultural traits. For instance, the rumba, a racialized dance commonly associated with Caribbean black cultures, became essentialized as “purely African” hence “primitive.”¹⁵ The discrimination in this case was articulated in a number of intersecting dimensions: the cultural practices that were associated with either indigenous or black people were also thought to belong to “the poor,” an association that was not entirely incorrect because historically these were the cultural groups that had been marginalized and pauperized since the colonial years, most noticeably as a result of the castas system.

The continuous and systematic violence inflicted through discourses, material regulations and de facto displacement caused the practitioners of these marginalized cultures to internalize demeaning representations of themselves. As some of the few surviving oral histories demonstrate, the carpas community between 1890 and 1930 (comprised of carpa managers, actors/musicians, and audiences) retrospectively referred to themselves as “the poor of the city” and to the carpas shows as “theater for the poor.” An illustrative example of this can be seen in the carpas-centered chronicle by former audience member Pedro Granados, written in a distinctive scatological style. In this retrospective text, the most characteristic feature is the celebration of the filth and poverty of the neighborhoods that hosted the carpas:

[El Barrio San Juan de Letrán se transforma con la Guerra de Revolución.] Viene la paz, el pueblo harto de sangre y de matanza . . . retorna a la plazuela, a su barrio . . . a convivir con su miseria y su mugre, pero, al no tener dónde explayarse lo hacen [sic] en las plazuelas de su querido barrio, donde se lanzan a cantar sus corridos y sus canciones de amor. Ahí se forma el crisol de los primeros

verdaderos artistas netamente mexicanos, los carperos pioneros del teatro mexicano. (Granados 25)

The recognition of the carpas as miserable facilitated, for instance, this community's acceptance to live in debased and dirty spaces. A full engagement with Granados' testimony demonstrates that such a diminishing self-conception made it easier for the carpas community to come to terms with aspects such as the bad odors surrounding them. Similarly, this self-image forced them to forge a sense of morality that embraced prostitution and crime as if these were the cultural habits that naturally corresponded to them. Not surprisingly, the carpa manager quoted earlier in this essay declared that they voluntarily agreed to move to "places far from the center where they would not hurt anybody's feelings." This shows the pernicious effects of naturalizing subordination, and how it provoked a problematic misrecognition in the subjectivities of the subordinated. In urban chronicles and retrospective accounts alike (Beals 1931, Bracho 1936, Covarrubias 1938, Granados 1984, Novo 1946), the people who kept attending the carpas after the theaters had been displaced to marginal areas seemed to have internalized the idea that these were the spaces where the poor naturally belonged.

I want to conclude by referring to Fraser's argument on the affective implications of (mis)recognition. Fraser conceives of recognition not only in terms of justice, nor exclusively as a problem of symbolic constructions, but mainly as the *de facto* social status:

When . . . institutionalized patterns of cultural value constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, whole other, or simply invisible, hence as less than full partners in social interaction, then we should speak of misrecognition and status subordination . . . misrecognition is neither a psychical deformation nor an impediment to ethical self-realization. Rather, it constitutes an institutionalized relation of subordination and a violation of justice. To be misrecognized. . . is not to suffer distorted identity or impaired subjectivity as a result of being depreciated by others. It is rather to be constituted by institutionalized patterns of cultural value in ways that prevent one from participating as a peer in social life (29).

As I see it, Fraser's model of recognition, which relates to a hierarchical social order, resonates with Quijano's notion of coloniality of power. These two models do not speak of social classes as an attribute of material dispossession, but rather of patterns of social classification enforced by hegemonic culture and as a result of institutions. As Fraser and Quijano state, by designating different social statuses to certain groups, this social order precludes stigmatized people from participating in public life in terms of equality. Consequently, the persons affected by these policies would end up internalizing the inferior social status imposed upon them by authorities and intellectuals.

Fraser's interpretation does not allow for a speculative approach. It is certain that due to an asymmetric distribution of public space enforced by institutions such as the Ayuntamiento's Sección de Diversiones Públicas, these theaters—at least in the format that I have described—eventually disappeared. Displacement and misdistribution through institutional force as a result of the type of misrecognition that Fraser identifies not only made this expressive culture die out, but also generated differential experiences of both urban space and notions of citizenship.

For the authorities, it was important to segregate the activities thought to correspond with each group, because this created and reinforced the notion that different people were to occupy different symbolic and material spaces in the city. Ultimately, this would justify why one of these groups had the authority to rule over the other, thus enhancing the conditions for governability in the modern, post-revolutionary Mexican state. To make this happen, a notion of superiority acknowledged by both sides of the social divide was indispensable. During the later nationalistic period, culture officers and film and television entrepreneurs "cleaned" and dignified the carpas shows, catering them to the taste of wealthier audiences. The once modest carpas formerly held under tents were relocated to the central area of the city in formal theaters that served to showcase the start of the nascent Mexican film industry, entirely transforming the early carpas scene.

Notes

1. “Plano de la ciudad de México. Antigua y Nueva Nomenclatura.” Editado por “El Rubí”. Mapoteca Manuel Orozco y Berra, Colección General, 12215. 1922.
2. Ayuntamiento del Distrito Federal. “Prohibición para establecer jacalones y caballitos en las calles de la ciudad.” This source is hosted in Archivo Histórico del Distrito Federal-Sección Diversiones Públicas (Hereafter AHDF-SDP), Vol.805, File. 1057.
3. AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File. 1057.
4. AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File. 1057.
5. AHDF-SDP, Vol.805, File. 1057. Emphasis added.
6. “Comisión para revisar el cumplimiento del reglamento de Diversiones y el Estado de las Carpas”, AHDF-SDP Vol. 812, File 1708, (1922).
7. “Clausura de la carpa María Conesa”, AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1720, (1922).
8. These oral histories have been collected and published thanks to the efforts of Socorro Merlín who, in the 1980s, conducted a series of interviews with actors and actresses from the carpas shows.
9. AHDF- SDP, Vol. 812, Exp. 1708. (1922).
10. Anónimo. “Degeneración y caída del género chico.” *Revista de Revistas*, 26 de Marzo de 1911: 8; and “Vergüenza del Teatro Frívolo: Bataclán y Procacidad.” *Revista de Revistas* 13 de Mayo, 1928: 1.
11. AHDF-SDP, Vol. 807, Exp. 1322-1 (1912), and AHDF-SDP, Vol. 807, exp. 1326 (1912).
12. AHDF- SDP, Vol. 807, File 1351 (1914).
13. AHDF-SDP, Vol. 812, File 1752-1 (1921).
14. “AHDF- SDP, Vol. 3924, File 65.
15. A newspaper article published in Mexico City in 1928 richly illustrates the ideas that this dance provoked among the Mexican elites in the context of nation formation and the foundational racism that still lingered in postcolonial Mexico. This article encumbered the rumba as the “essence of Cuban spirit” and celebrates its “pure African nature.” Hence the worth of the rumba was by no means credited to its aesthetic or musical value (for it was considered “too simple”), but rather to its capability to preserve tradition and provide a local color vis-a vis the hispanic criollo culture. The resulting syllogism—simplistic as it is pernicious—that black albeit pure is essentially primitive and therefore inferior. See Martí Casanovas, “Arte Moderno: Afroclubanismo Artístico” in *Revista de Revistas*, February 19, 1928.

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