DISIDENTIFICATIONS

Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics

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Sister Acts:
Ela Troyano and Carmelita Tropicana

This chapter tells the story of two sisters. Ela Troyano and Alina Troyano are Cuban-American queer feminist performers who have been working in New York City since the early 1980s. Ela Troyano is a filmmaker as well as a performer. Alina Troyano, known better by her stage name Carmelita Tropicana, identifies as a lesbian and started by performing at the now-famous lesbian feminist performance space known as the WOW Café. Both sisters played prominent roles in the New York avant-garde film and theater movements of the 1980s. Although some commentators have discussed their cultural productions and performances, no more than passing references have been made to their identities as U.S. Latinas.\(^1\) I take this opportunity to discuss the specificity of their identities and the ways in which their identity practices inflect and shape their work.

I am especially interested in analyzing two modes of cultural critique that the artists employ. Camp and *choteo* are both styles of performance and reception that rely on humor to examine social and cultural forms. The bulk of this chapter will consider the ways Ela Troyano signifies upon an established tradition of camp avant-garde filmmaking and the way Carmelita Tropicana uses the Cuban style of *burla* (which roughly translates as joking or exaggerated comedic performance). Both performance styles have usually been described as specifically male practices.\(^2\) I will explore how two sisters dereify these modes of self-enactment.

Both camp and *choteo* are, within the terms of this study, disidentificatory practices. These two modes of self-enactment, or style politics, differ from the other modes of disidentification that I outline in this study primarily in their strategic and disarming use of humor. Comedic disidentification accomplishes important cultural critique while at the same time providing cover from, and enabling the avoidance of, scenarios of direct confrontation with phobic and reactionary ideologies.
Finally, this essay will consider the question of hybridity and the role it plays within U.S. identity. Although I discuss camp alongside my reading of Troyano’s filmic production and *chocho* as it is discernible through Carmelita Tropicana’s skits, monologues, and stand-up comedy, both disidentificatory strategies are present in the work of each sister. Hybridity is one way to discuss the crossfire of influences, affiliations, and politics that happen between a lesbian identity, as well as in or in between the intersection of Cuban and North American traditions of performance.

The heuristic impulse that propels this chapter is concerned with a distinctly lesbian and Latina camp sensibility. There is some question as to whether or not “camp” is camp when it happens outside of its usual cultural parameters. The discourse on camp has been—at least since Susan Sontag’s infamous notes from the 1960s—a discourse of middle- to upper-class white gay male sensibilities. The notion of camp I mine in this chapter is one in which “camp” is understood not only as a strategy of representation, but also as a mode of enacting self against the pressures of the dominant culture’s identity-denying protocols. *Carmelita Tropicana* (1993), a short film by Ela Troyano, clearly articulates an ironic system of signs that, while still being very campy, is decidedly not employing the same referents as white male camp. The humor that Carmelita Tropicana produces represents a life-world that we can understand, according to the film’s eponymous performance artist star, as “Loisaida.” The Lower East Side of *Carmelita Tropicana* is a queer and Latina life-world where the dominant culture makes only one appearance in the form of overt-the-top send-ups of abortion rights counterprotesters. Beyond that, the queer life-world that the film depicts is one of Latinas and lesbians, political activities, and performance artists.

Before I delve into my reading of *Carmelita Tropicana* and the specificities of *cubana* lesbian camp, I want to mention the one piece of cultural-studies writing that has in some way loosely interrogated the issue of Latino kitsch: Celeste Olaquiaga’s *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities*. Olaquiaga’s book delineates three degrees of kitsch sensibility in New York and its relation to Latino religious objects. The first degree constitutes a fascination with these objects because they represent a model of spirituality that is not available to the aficionado. They are representations of powerful emotions that help the first-degree kitsch follower grasp these higher emotions. The second degree of kitsch is the untangling of the icon from its religious/emotional context. Its representation is dislodged from its cultural referent, the empty icon or gaudy bauble that can be found at Little Ricky’s on the Lower East Side. The third degree of kitsch is a true postmodern hybrid, the recycling of a past cultural construct for a present tense. Here Olaquiaga’s primary example is the *altares* produced by Chicano, Nuyorican, and some white artists. In this final degree of kitsch, the kitsch object is recycled and recontextualized in a high-art setting. The recycling is, I will argue, central to any understanding of *Carmelita Tropicana*. The importance of this pioneering study is indicated in the film as the ac-
tual book appears at Carmelita's bedside in her own kitschy bedroom. Interestingly enough, the book itself, within this frame and recontextualization, becomes a bit of "Loisaida" kitsch.

What Olalquiaga's book fails to do, however, is factor the unique relation of sexual minorities to the kitsch object. We might also tease out her use of the word kitsch instead of camp, a word that resonates as the way in which a minority culture reappropriates the dominant culture. Olalquiaga's word choice underplays, and potentially erases, the roles of queers in the production and consumption of kitsch objects and/or sensibilities. One of the difficulties in writing about kitsch and camp is that the two words are often confused with each other. This interchangeability is, of course, wrong, because both words have ontologically distinct (though not entirely separate) lives. Andrew Ross makes a distinction between the two by describing kitsch as having more "high"-art pretensions and a higher degree of self-seriousness, whereas camp seems to be more ironic and playful. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines camp as being more spacious and "out" than kitsch. Indeed, the word camp is integral to what Esther Newton calls the "gay world" of homosexuality, whereas kitsch's usage seems to be less tied to any specific group. More recent accounts of aesthetics that relish the "tacky" are the works of Sontag, Ross, and Sedgwick. This itself is not a rule, as the example of Sedgwick, in The Epistemology of the Closet, delimiting the binary of art/kitsch makes evident. Kitsch is most definitely on the queer side of the binary in that text. But in Megalopolis, kitsch is not a survivalist mode of identity enactment within a phobic public sphere. Instead, it is a nostalgic postmodern aesthetic that is basically a longing for a lost emotional intensity. Like Olalquiaga, I identify a certain mode of cross-generational, cross-cultural recycling in U.S. Latino culture, but, unlike her, I name it "camp" because I am interested in considering its convergences, alignments, and reverberations with the camp produced by sexual minorities. My reading suggests that Carmelita Tropicana and its star's performance disrupt the stability of the camp = queer/kitsch = ethnic protocol.

Beyond the synthesis of the Latino and the campy, Carmelita Tropicana articulates a distinctly lesbian camp. There is no doubt that camp has been overwhelmingly associated with the gay male subculture, but the work of some lesbian and feminist theorists has begun to suggest a powerful tradition of female and lesbian camp. Pamela Robertson, for example, has undertaken a project to "de-essentialize" the link between gay men and camp, a link that, in Robertson's estimation, "reifies both camp and gay male taste." Robertson suggests that camp as a structural activity has an affinity with feminist discussions of gender construction, performance, and enactment; and that, as such, we can examine a form of camp as a feminist practice. In taking on camp for women, I reclaim a form of female aestheticism, related to female masquerade, that articulates and subverts the image- and culture-making process to which women have traditionally been given access.
Following Robertson, I see Troyano's film and its star performance as producing a mode of camp that subverts dominant image- and culture-making apparatuses (especially Hollywood film) that have either rendered invisible or grossly caricaturized lesbians, Latinas, and especially Latina lesbians. An important by-product of this mode of camp is the dislodging of the discourse of camp from male dominance.

But, if the discourse of camp has been male-dominated, the social and aesthetic history itself suggests more complex and complicated dynamics. Although Ela Troyano's first film, Bubble People (1982), has not been widely seen, it both situates and comments on her work in relationship to that of Jack Smith. Village Voice journalist C. Carr provides a valuable account of an interaction between the director and her famous star, Jack Smith:

There is a scene in Bubble People where the spectral Jack Smith, looking like a drag biker, has a little encounter with the filmmaker Ela Troyano. "I am the Bubble Goddess," he intones, then pauses. "Tell me the truth. Has the camera started?" Close-up on his beard and beard and wraparound orange shades. "We can get better results if we're honest with each other, and you tell me the camera has started. Depicting what a great actor I must be."12

Within the campy moment, one sees a serious instant where filmmaker and performer check in with each other, collaborating as equals; it is ultimately an instant where, in the tradition of the North American avant-garde of the 1960s, the film's artifice is stripped away. This was one of many collaborations between Smith and Troyano. According to Carr, Troyano began taking pictures because she wanted to work with Smith, a performer she had admired, and he needed someone to take the photographs for his slide shows.13 It is my belief that reading Troyano's film as also influenced by Smith makes available a more comprehensive understanding of her production.

Smith, the now-legendary avant-garde filmmaker and performance artist who died of AIDS complications in 1989, pioneered an image of a hilarious and hyperactive gay male subjectivity that had not only not existed in representation before him, but was essentially unimaginable to queer spectators. Smith's project in his various underground acting jobs during the 1960s, his own films, which included the censored underground classic Flaming Creatures (1963), and his various stage performances during the almost three decades that his career spanned, were described by Michael Moon as "a fiercely unsentimental project of reclaiming his own and other people's queer energies (all kinds of queer people, including gay ones) from the myriad forms of human wreckage into which our society has tended to channel it."14 In the same way that Olalquiaga's third degree of kirsch recaptures a lost presence, Smith's performances and film reclaim lost queer energies.

Carmelita Tropicana features four very different versions of the Latina: Carmelita, Orchidida, Sophia, and Dec. In the film, the Carmelita character is a Loisaida performance artist and lesbian activist. Her sidekick and constant companion is the flaky
Orchidia, also a member of the fictional direct-action group GIA and a practitioner of postmodern dance, holistic medicine, and the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria. Although these women differ from each other in their varying levels of spaciness and neurosis, Carmelita’s sister Sophia is nothing like the other Latina women in the film. Sophia is desperately trying to make it in the corporate business world and tries her best to dress for success. The film suggests that Sophia, despite her aspirations to be a conservative and upwardly mobile Latina, is often embroiled in Carmelita’s life. Dee, a woman who first mugs Carmelita on her way home from a performance and later meets up with her victim in jail after the other women are arrested in a demonstration, is a *hermana sandiuguer*. Of all these women, Dee is perhaps the greatest challenge to the dominant culture’s understanding of just what constitutes a Latina. Dee is, by ancestry, a North American Anglo, but she was inducted into a Puerto Rican women’s gang in prison. Dee’s identification as Latina undermines the misconception of Latinos as a racially homogeneous group. Her place in the film serves to destabilize any reductive understanding of Latina/o status. Dee’s HIV-positive status also offers a representation of the ways in which the virus does not discriminate and affects women (especially women of color) with equal brutality.

The film’s very first scene, in which the lesbian performance artist emerges from a backdrop of flashy colored curtains and proceeds to feign a thick Cuban accent as she launches into her opening monologue, establishes the film’s narrative space. During that monologue, Carmelita speaks of the mixing of cultures in Loisaida:

Loisaida is the place to be. That’s right. It’s multi-cultural, multi-generational, mucho multi, multi-lingual. And like myself you gotta be multi-lingual. I am very good with the tongue. As a matter of fact the first language I learned when got to New York was Jewish. I learned from my girlfriend Sharon. She is Jewish. She teach me and I write poem for her in Jewish. Title of the poem is “Oy-Vay Number One”: Oy-vay / I schlep and schlep / I hurt my tuchas / I feel meshuggeneh / Oy-vay. Thank you very much.

In this scene, Cuban identity is recycled and remade. Carmelita’s thick accent during the monologue is obviously fake. The artist’s name harks back to the famous nightclub that signifies the excessive opulence of prerevolution Cuba. The garish, sparkling red dress that she wears signifies a lost notion of glamour that is associated with the Cuba of the 1950s. There is also a camification of the present that occurs when Carmelita describes the Lower East Side as “multi-cultural, multi-generational, mucho multi, multi-lingual.” This last reference to the multilingual sets Carmelita up to purr “I am very good with the tongue,” a double-entendre quip that is reminiscent of Mae West. Carmelita’s Yiddish joke also aligns her with an earlier tradition of ethnic comics who were Jewish. All of what transpires in this scene is a recycling that I identify as the film’s camp practice. The recycling encompasses a distant Cuban past (the Club Tropicana of the 1950s, Ricky Ricardo’s exaggerated accent, a showgirl’s sparkly red dress), an American past (the very history of stand-up comedy and the
formidable influence of Jews in this North American tradition), and the recent U.S.
past (in the form of a reference to the already exhausted wars over multiculturalism
in the academy and popular culture).

Carr has explained that “if Jack Smith has been her [Troyano’s] greatest influence
as a filmmaker—along with Jacques Rivette and Russ Meyer—she’s been informed
just as much by Smith’s performance.”15 The centrality of performance art to
Troyano’s work is apparent in Carmelita Tropicana. Carmelita Tropicana’s perfor-
mance—the very fact that she is clearly performing during the film’s opening scene—
connotes the importance of performance within both the film and the mode of cul-
tural enactment that I am calling cubana dyke camp. As the film’s narrative proceeds
from this space of performative enunciation, the spectator is left with the residual
understanding that this narrative is not only about a performance artist, but also
about performance itself, particularly performance that is campy in its negotia-
tions between Latina identity practices, queer/lesbian humor, and the dominant culture.

After Carmelita describes the Lower East Side world as “the place to be,” the
film’s next two scenes depict a different version of Loisaida. Walking home from her
performance, Carmelita is mugged by a female assailant who later turns out to be
Dee. The sequence depicts the reality of urban crime and violence that many U.S.
Latinas cope with on a day-to-day basis. Nonetheless, the film’s camp valence takes
the edge off this incident when it is revealed that the mugger’s only weapon is a pen.
Here Troyano’s film both achieves a realist representation and then, with its last twist,
spins into absurdist dimensions first explored by Smith and other 1960s filmmakers,
such as Ron Rice and Ken Jacobs. An establishing shot of a street sign that reads “Ave
C” and “Loisaida” concretely locates the film’s settings.

A tracking shot moves from the street sign to a large movie poster in Carmelita’s
bedroom. The poster is for a Latin American melodrama titled La Estrella Vacia (The
empty star). The poster, and other aspects of the mise-en-scène, demarcate Carmelita’s
personal space as being as thoroughly campy as her performance. Carmelita’s bed-
cover is decorated with extravagant roses. Her bed itself is draped with a white mesh
netting that gives it an almost Victorian look. The room’s walls are painted a bright
pink. The aforementioned copy of Megalopolis is thrown on Carmelita’s bed. Her
phone is an old black dial phone that looks as though it is out of a 1940s film noir.
Carmelita is awakened from her slumber by the ringing phone. The caller is a butch
lesbian Latina known as the “Dictator,” the leader of a feminist organization called
the GIA, a parodic representation of organizations such as the Lesbian Avengers or
Queer Nation. The Dictator orders the star to rendezvous with other members of
GIA at Tompkins Square Park. As the Dictator barks her orders, the call-waiting sig-
nal clicks on the phone line. As she code-switches from English to Spanish, the brief
conversation with her father reveals that she has a seven-year-old brother, Pepito, and
her father is having his prostate operated on.16 She switches back to the now-angered
Dictator, who quotes World Health Organization statistics on HIV infection in
women and children. She follows this statement with a command to “never put me on hold.” The phone conversation, like Carmelita’s room, depicts the mixing of cultures and historical moments. The room’s deco ambiance is offset by the postmodern theory book that is casually tossed on the bed. The old-fashioned phone has the ultra-modern feature of call waiting. Her conversation with her lesbian activist mentor is cut up with a conversation with her Cuban father. Troyano employs this mixing across time and cultures to achieve a radical camp effect that reveals, in exaggerated terms, the mestiza ge of contemporary U.S. Latino culture and politics.

Although Orcchidia and Carmelita are space cadets in the eyes of the over-the-top butch character the Dictator, they work, within the film’s comedic frame, as important social factors. Their trendy apparel—Carmelita’s ridiculously high-heeled tennis shoes and Orcchidia’s multicolored beanie hat, and the standard issue of New York activist leather jackets that both women wear—both lampoons and represents the lifestyle of the “Loisaida” dyke activist.

Fashion is important elsewhere in the film. Sophia, Carmelita’s darker-skinned sister, is in “Dressed for Success Hispanic Corporate Woman” garb. The camera surveys Sophia piece by piece as she reads a magazine article that explains the various “don’ts” for Latinas in the corporate machine. Sophia, with steak tartare lipstick, fushcia nail polish, excessively high heels, and gold door-knocker earrings, embodies all of these “don’ts” that the article warns against. In the next scene she appears in, Sophia’s whole body fills the screen, displaying her amalgamation of fashion “mistakes.” In this scene she is harassed by a bodega clerk who, through the lens of the usual racist assumptions of what a Latina looks like, presumes that Sophia is a monolingual African-American. Sophia snaps back sharply that “Latinas come in all colors, nena.” This scene is significant in that it humorously challenges racist depictions of Latinas within and outside of the Latina/o community.

To get what is powerful and potentially socially destabilizing about the cubana dyke camp I am describing, one must have some access to the queer life-world that is being signified upon. The fact that most of the film is set in a women’s prison needs to be understood as a campy metacommentary on one of Hollywood’s most common depictions of Latinas as tough bull dykes in the B movie “women in prison” genre. Part of the camp effect is the biting commentary about the treatment of Latina bodies within Hollywood’s prescribed operating procedures. What is also relevant about the recycling of this site is the juxtaposition of seeing these particular Latinas, characters who are quirkier and more complicated than any image that Hollywood has been able to invent when trying to represent Latinas, within this standardized backdrop. Jean Carloomoustro’s video L Is for the Way You Look (1991) is another experimentation with the uses of lesbian camp. In that project, an actual clip from a women’s prison movie is shown, dubbed over with lines from lesbian theorists Monique Wittig and Audre Lorde. The scene concluded with the prisoners rallying together and chanting “Let’s get Zsa Zsa,” a reference to Zsa Zsa Gabor’s insistence
that she could not go to jail for slapping a Beverly Hills police officer because she was afraid of lesbians. Moments like these in Troyano’s and Carlomusto’s films take back the negative image and resuscitate it with the powerful charge of dyke camp.

In *Carmelita Tropicana*, Troyano uses the prison scene for a movie within a movie through a flashback sequence that depicts the story that Carmelita tells her sister Sophia about the tragedy of their great-aunt Cukita. Whereas the prison scene itself mimics a B movie, the flashback is shot in black and white and is silent with musical accompaniment and subtitles. Great-aunt Cukita’s husband is a refined *habanero* electrical engineer. After killing the woman whom he blindly fell in love with, he commits suicide by ingesting poison. The widowed aunt is then seduced by a lowly delivery boy who, presumably knowing that he can never really have Cukita, kills her after dancing a passionate tango with her. The black-and-white sequence recasts the entire film in terms of prerevolution Cuba and assigns two of the characters (the butch players in the main narrative) the roles of men. This (fe)male drag is, in a way, akin to a tradition of campy male drag that we might associate with venues such as Jack Smith’s performances and Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company. Carmelita’s transformation into the “ugly man,” a rough, pockmarked, and unshaven proletarian deliveryman (and her new character, Pingalito, in her stage show *Milk of Amnesia*), is a campy reappraisal of the drag used in the rich tradition of North
American avant-garde theater and drag revues. The male character in this sequence is supposed to register both outside of and inside of the erotics of “butch/femme.” This depiction of a lost exilic homeland—with its politics replaced by a drag performance of an ill-fated heterosexual, class-defined romance—enables an opulent scene of cross-identification that is, in one manner of speaking, queer. Cross-identifications, as Sedgwick and others have forcefully argued, are standard operating procedures for queers. Sedgwick has explained that queer is a moment of perpetual flux, a movement that is eddying and turbulent. The word queer itself, in its origins in the German quer, means “across”; the concept itself can only be understood as connoting a mode of identifications that is as relational as it is oblique.17 There is something distinctly queer about the lesbian cross-dressing in Carmelita Tropicana; it reproduces various identifications across a range of experiences—cultural, racial, political, sexual . . .

The flashback posits a historical condition—“always the same story . . . violencia y amor”—that unites the four women across their differences. It is at this point that the women in prison sequence transmutes into a send-up of a Hollywood musical. All the prison cells automatically click open and the four female protagonists emerge in rumbera outfits made out of what appear to be military fatigue. The musical number that ensues is a Mexican ranchera titled “Prisioneras del amor.” The choice of a Mexican ranchera is indicative of Latina camp’s ability to index and reclaim clichéd and sentimental moments and tropes across latinidad. East Coast Latinas performing a West Coast musical genre with a Mexican song comments on the ways in which Hollywood cinema, along with other aspects of dominant culture, such as census taking, collapse the diversity of the U.S. Latino community into one set of shallow cultural stereotypes. Troyano’s film, in this instance, plays with the dominant mode of storytelling. The lyrics themselves, “Prisioneras del amor / prisioneras de la vida,” could be the title of a Mexican melodrama. The song speaks in lavish terms as to how love offers both great warmth and great pain (“el amor lo da calor y también gran dolor”). The song unites the four women who had previously been squabbling with one another in the cell. The women speak of their commonality as prisoners of love and life. The song calls for the throwing off of habits of incarcerated nuns and making liberation their new religion.18 Although this musical number is extravagant and brilliantly over the top, it should not be dismissed as nothing more than campy fun. The metaphor of Latinas as prisoners is a poignant one when discussing the status of the Latina and lesbian image within representation. The idea of liberation that is invoked in this song is also a more serious and political call for liberation from a dominant culture that reduces such identities to hollowed-out stereotypes. Troyano’s strategic use of camp allows her film and its characters to reinhabit these stereotypes, both calling attention to the inaccuracy of these representations and “fixing” such representation from the inside by filling in these representational husks with complicated, antiessentialist, emotionally compelling characters.

* Carmelita Tropicana* is a film that refigures camp and rescues it from a position as
fetishized white queer sensibility. Camp is a form of artificial respiration: it breathes new life into old situations. Camp is, then, more than a worldview; it is a strategic response to the breakdown of representation that occurs when a queer, ethnically marked, or other subject encounters his or her inability to fit within the majoritarian representational regime. It is a measured response to the forced evacuation from dominant culture that the minority subject experiences. Camp is a practice of saturating different lives, of reanimating, through repetition with a difference, a lost country or moment that is relished and loved. Although not innately politically valenced, it is a strategy that can do positive identity- and community-affirming work. Carmelita Tropicana represents cubana camp and at the same time returns to the island itself with a highly melodramatic story, a story that has been lost for the two sisters (described earlier).

Such a deployment of camp styles and practices is, at its core, a performative move. Reiteration and citation are the most easily identifiable characteristics of this mode of camp performativity. According to Judith Butler, a performative provisionally succeeds if its action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices. For Butler, a performative draws on and covers over the constitutive conventions by which it is mobilized.19 Butler is concerned specifically with the performative charge of queerness, and it is my contention that this theory is also applicable to the workings of various minority groups. The repetition of the quotidian is precisely what the cubana kitsch and Lower East Side lesbian style in Carmelita Tropicana is enacting.

The repetition that Butler outlines, like the reclaiming in Jack Smith's work that Michael Moon outlines and the recycling that Olu-Ona discusses, can all contribute to a potential understanding of the camp project that is Carmelita Tropicana. The larger than life (i.e., Hollywood icon) takes on aspects of the everyday; the exotic is "de-exoticized" and brought into the subject's sphere of the ordinary; artifacts from the past that have been discarded as "trashy" (the word kitsch comes from a German phrase loosely meaning "street rubbish") are recuperated and become a different "new" thing. With this in mind, I argue that lesbian camp and also cubana camp are materialized in Carmelita Tropicana, whose star works as the ultimate campy dyke, whose filmmaker and star bridge lost countries with contemporary urban life, queer politics with Latina aesthetics, and which, in general, elevates the trashy to blissful heights.

Camping like a Butch: The Female-to-Male Drag

One of the most powerfully argued cases for the existence of lesbian camp is Sue-Ellen Case's "Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic."20 Case takes to task a trend in feminist theory that has stigmatized the butch in the butch/femme dyad as a male-identified subject suffering from a form of false consciousness. Kate Davy has challenged Case's formulations by contending that camp is not a useful strategy of resis-
Carmelita Tropicana. Photo by Dona Ann McAdams.
tance for female subjects in the same way that it is for gay males. Davy addresses Case’s theoretical maneuver:

She invokes Camp as a “discourse,” instead of merely using its salient elements, the baggage of Camp discourse is imbricated in her argument. The result is that the subject position she constructs does not walk out of the hom(m)osexual frame of reference as effectively as it could, for Camp as a discourse is both ironically and paradoxically of hom(m)osexuality, that is, male sexuality. . . . In Case’s scheme, Camp is a neutral, nonideologically bound discourse in that it is produced by both Gay Men and Lesbians out of the condition of being closeted.21

For Davy, camp is a discourse that provides certain tools that she catalogs as artifice, wit, irony, and exaggeration, and these tools are available to butch-femme gender play separate from the ways in which they are inscribed by camp as a historically marked phenomenon. Although I find myself agreeing with much of Davy’s critique of Case, I worry about what seems a too easy equivalence between Irigarayan hom(m)osexuality and gay male sexuality. Although I do not doubt that the historicity of camp has been historically “marked” as Davy describes, I see in certain modes of lesbian performance, to borrow a phrase from experimental filmmaker Barbara Hammer, a “dyketactics” that dislodges the discourse of camp from certain traditions of male dominance.

Carmelita’s female-to-male drag, and its specifically campy cultural critique, function as a dyketactics that avoids the pitfalls that Davy describes. Davy, paraphrasing Wayne Dynes’s Encyclopedia of Homosexuality,22 asserts:

Camp is always represented with an invisible wink. But instead of realizing the promise and threat of its subversive potential for imagining and inscribing an “elsewhere” for alternative social and sexual realities, the wink of Camp (re)assures its audiences of the ultimate harmlessness of its play, its palatability for bourgeois sensibilities. . . .

Camp is neither good nor bad, it is just more or less effectively deployed. In the context of gay male theater and its venues, Camp is indeed a means of signaling through the flames, while in lesbian performance it tends to fuel and fan the fire.23

I partially agree with Davy’s point that camp is neither intrinsically good or bad. What is perplexing about this passage is her need to follow this statement with the generalization that camp is useful for gay men but counterproductive for lesbians. After disavowing any understandings of camp as having an a priori ideological charge (neither good nor bad), she proceeds to reinscribe an understanding of it as being a politically viable strategy only for gay men. I take issue with this turn in Davy’s argument because I see it as undervaluing lesbian camp as a valuable disidentificatory strategy of enacting identity through the powerful rhetorics of parody and pastiche. I am also weary of one of the most significant repercussions of Davy’s argument: the reification of camp as an exclusively gay male practice. Finally, I see some dangers in
dismissing the ideological and survivalist dimensions for all queers. Cathy Griggers has contended that the description of camp as “prepolitical” is a common miscomprehension of the straight mind:

Take camp struggles over straight semiosis, for example, which gay and lesbian subcultures have always understood as a style of everyday cultural politics and survival and not as prepolitical, a reading produced by straight “politicized subjects.” If we premise that the body is not outside textuality, that the body itself is a field of significations, a site for the production of cultural meanings and ideological ramifications, then we admit that we play the game this way or that, we can choose to pass or not within the scene and the next, but we can’t choose to stop playing with signs, with our own material cultural production as a cultural (i.e., visibly signifying) body.  

Griggers succinctly describes my problems with Davy’s understanding of lesbian camp as an unproductive site of resistance. To limit or foreclose the possibility of lesbian camp is to circumscribe both lesbian and queer identifications.

Carmelita Tropicana’s camp exceeds Davy’s formulations, contests the bourgeois conventions within the Cuban exile community, and undermines the patriarchal character of most representations of Cuban and Cuban-American identity. A section of her performance Milk of Amnesia stars Pingalito—a name that sounds like a diminutive of the Cuban slang for penis—a character she plays in drag as a stereotypically loud Cuban man. Carmelita’s drag performance operates on an axis concerned with more than biological gender difference. In this instance, the drag is calibrated also to represent and parody identities across class, national, and generational lines. Pingalito’s monologue represents a national character that is recognizable as a Cuban form of masculine jingoism. A skit from the 1990 play Memorias de la revolución has Pingalito breaking away from the diegesis of the play and addressing the audience in his capacity as tour guide and authority on cubanidad. Pingalito wears the national dress of a Cuban man, the guayabera shirt. He also wears a brown fedora hat and dark fifties-style glasses that are held together at the nose bridge with tape. He punctuates his every locution with a wave of or a puff on his large cigar. Pingalito comments on the play’s diegesis and then proceeds to give the spectator a context for understanding the play, a lecture on Cuba. As a visual prop he pulls out a paper place mat from his pocket. He explains that the place mat is from the restaurant Las Lillas, a popular Cuban steak house in Miami. The reference to Las Lillas is a manifestation of a certain mode of Cuban-American camp—it recalls a bit of middle-class Cuban-American family-life culture within the context of lesbian performance art. The camp speech-act references the elusive yet powerful binds between a past life in a typical homophobic middle-class emigrant family in Miami and the bohemian art world of New York avant-garde lesbian Lower East Side performance spaces such as the Club Chandelier and the WOW Café. The place mat has a picture of Cuba on it and it is titled “Facts about Cuba.” The first fact read by Pingalito is that “Cuba is the
Carmelita Tropicana. Photo by Dona Ann McAdams.
Pearl of the Antilles.” The character, speaking in a ridiculously exaggerated accent, proceeds to wax romantic about the beauty of the landscape. The monologue concludes with Pingalito performing a familiar form of Latino machismo as he describes the showgirls at the famous club Tropicana as possibly the most impressive feature of this landscape. Pingalito is incensed when he reads the next fact, an assertion that Cuba is slightly smaller than Pennsylvania. Pingalito warns the audience not to believe everything they read because he has been to Pennsylvania, and furthermore, he has a cousin who lives in Pennsylvania, and he knows for a fact that Cuba is bigger. With these first two facts, Carmelita establishes Pingalito’s overzealousness by his ludicrous nationalism. The performance is especially poignant for second-generation Cuban-Americans who have never even seen the island and have had to depend on similarly hyperbolic renditions of their lost homeland. When Pingalito warns the audience not to believe everything they read, he signifies upon the condition of second-generation Cuban Americans who have to juggle, decipher, and translate propaganda and anecdotal evidence in order to “know” their native land.

The third fact is that Spanish is Cuba’s national language. Pingalito comments that it is a very beautiful language that Cubans speak with their mouths and hands. This reminds Pingalito of one of his favorite Cuban sayings: “¿Oye mano, adónde está tu abuela?” (Hey, brother, where is your grandmother?), which leads him to the fourth fact: “Three-fourths of all Cubans are white and of European descent.” Pingalito adds that of this three-fourths, most have dark tans all year. He explains that when asked about the location of his grandmother he responds “dark and proud.” This last bit of cubana kitsch makes a joke that challenges predictable racisms within the European Cuban population. Pingalito’s quip speaks to the hypocrisy of Cubans who can trace their European roots to Spain but are nonetheless unable to pin down that missing grandmother who is, more often than not, of African descent.

Davy and other critics do not recognize the ability of lesbian camp to imagine new realities. The routine I have transcribed here is one in which camp not only accesses a new reality, but also lodges, through auspices of humor, a pointed social critique. Absent from Pingalito’s monologue is the “wink” that Davy writes about. No one is let off the hook; the ironic and sharp attacks on Cuban and Cuban-American racism, sexism, and general hypocrisy are not retracted. Homi K. Bhabha’s description of colonial mimicry as a form of imitation that resembles, but never quite succeeds in reproducing, the colonizer’s image functions to describe the mimicry that is at the center of Carmelita’s drag performances. This style of mimicry reproduces a facsimile that misses because it is “not quite/not white.” The effect of this image is not assimilation, but rather menace to the colonial/dominant paradigm. Carmelita’s mimicry of the Cuban national character, and her decision to personify him as a machista, is a funny, yet nonetheless serious, examination and exploration of cubanidad.

Carmelita’s performance ultimately proves that camp and lesbian drag are spacious
Carmelita Tropicana. Photo by Paulo Court.
modes of self-authorization and self-enactment. Drag's elasticity extends to depict various subjectivities that traverse not only gender identification, but also national, class, and geographic identity coordinates. (Pingalito in "Memorias de la revolución," for example, is an older Miami-based Cuban exile who is sheltered within that city's right-wing Cuban power base while he pines for a mythical lost Cuba.) Her performance as Pingalito helps her access aspects of cubanidad and her mimicry of such aspects lodges critical readings of these identities and the systems of power and entitlement that fuel them. Carmelita's drag does not wink at the jingoistic Cuban nationalist and reassure him that everything is satisfactory; rather, it renders visible the mechanisms of privilege that such subjectivities attempt to occlude.

The Importance of Being Choteo

The great Cuban anthropologist and ethnographer Fernando Ortiz defined the word choteo in his lexicon of cubanismos as follows:

In spite of the foregoing, the Africanist thesis is more versimilar, founded as it is on the locum or yoruba term sob or chot, which means "to speak, to say," and, besides, "to throw," "to tear," "to cast out," all of which harmonizes with the respective sense of our choteo. From the root cho or sob are derived sobro, "to converse," sobrobelin, "to speak to someone behind his back," sobwerere, "to speak without rhyme or reason."

Likewise, porpongue chota is "act of spying," "to pry," and lucumi cho is also, "to keep watch," "to spy" which avoids the gypsy etymology of choia, as well as that of choteo.26

Ortiz's definition of choteo is central to this reading. The etymology he presents suggests that choteo is imported from African culture as a mode of being, a style of performance, a practice of everyday life. It signifies upon a range of activities that include tearing, talking, throwing, maligning, spying, and playing. All these verbs help to partially translate the practice of choteo.

Gustavo Pérez Firmat questions the validity of Ortiz's claims and suggests that there might be more to some of the European origins of the word. At one point he describes Ortiz's text itself as being "untidy." This critic does not explain, however, that choteo is, by its very foundations, a creolization, a cross-cultural mix that often resembles a cross-cultural mess. Ultimately, Pérez Firmat extols the text's virtues as being a work of high modernism, virtually "The Wasteland" of modern dictionaries.27 Its fragmentation should not be confused with traditional modernism's characteristics because it offers a glimpse at the operations of creolization in the specific form of the practice of choteo.

I propose choteo as another optic, one that is perhaps aligned with a camp reading, and, at other times, perhaps out of sync with such a hermeneutic, in order to decipher Carmelita's performances and production. Choteo is like camp in that it can be a fierce send-up of dominant cultural formations. Choteo, again, like camp, can be a
style of colonial mimicry that is simultaneously a form of resemblance and menace. Both strategies possess a disidentificatory potential insofar as they mediate between a space of identification with and total disavowal of the dominant culture's normative identificatory nodes.

Cuban essayist Jorge Mañach also made an important contribution to the delineation of choteo. For Mañach, choteo was a performance style about the “cubano de la calle” (the average Cuban on the street). His book *Indignación del choteo* is concerned with describing the Cuban national character and a particular strain of this character that is choteo. For Mañach, choteo is a pathological weak spot in the Cuban composition, a shortcoming, a lack of seriousness, a fault. This chapter aims, in part, to depathologize this aspect of cubanidad and reconsider it as a strategy of self-enactment that helps a colonized or otherwise dispossessed subject enact a self through a critique of the normative culture. A practitioner of choteo is known as a choteador. Mañach describes choteo as “una actitud erigida en hábito, y esta habitualidad es su característica más importante” (an attitude hardened into a habit, and this habitualness is its most important characteristic).28 It is so habitual it becomes systematic. Choteo is a form of mockery and joking that systematically undermines all authority. It is a practice that perpetuates disarray, mixture, and general confusion.29

The character of Pingalito offers a powerful example of choteo in action. Pingalito is choteador par excellence. His monologue on race on the island and his citation of a cryptic racist question are an instance where the choteador, through mockery and exaggeration, lampoons the polite racisms of everyday Cuban life. One should remember that this transpires within a camp performance that attempts to mimic and menace these phobic national identifications.

A performance by Carmelita in *The 1990 Decade Show* at the Studio Museum of Harlem contained sketches and bits that also serve as examples of Carmelita as choteadora. During one of her routines, the performance artist explains how she is not just a beauty queen but is always thinking, which makes her an intellectual. She thinks about origins. She wonders out loud where she, Carmelita, learned her famous brand of Cuban-Japanese cooking, her well-known chicken sushi. She then wonders how she, Carmelita, heard her calling to start her church of the born-again virgins, which is based in the heart of the Lower East Side. Finally, Carmelita explains that her calling came to her from the Virgin Mary. Taking her fresh-fruit boa and putting it on her head like a heavenly shroud, Carmelita channels visions of the holy Virgin that appeared to her at sea in 1955. This apparition is a choteo retelling of the Virgen de la Cobre, Cuba’s patron saint, a Virgin who appeared to sailors lost at sea. Carmelita is in a rowboat, starving and knowing that the only food she has is one little Milky Way. With the fruit boa/shroud, Carmelita deploys a booming voice, still retaining the same thick and exaggerated Cuban accent, to retell her divine vision. The Virgin announces herself as Mary and explains that the goddess herself has chosen her to be the next hottest Latin superstar. She qualifies this by explaining that she has to wait
until Robert Redford discovers Latinos in *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Carmelita takes off the boa, assuming her usual persona, and jumps up and down exclaiming, "I knew it, I knew it!" The Virgin continues to illustrate her future, calling, "Listen, Carmelita, Cuba will no longer be your home, her revolution will not be your revolution. Yours will be an international revolution to give dignity to Third World women everywhere. Carmelita, the *Kunst* is your *Waffen*." Carmelita drops the fruit boa and responds to the Virgin with some skepticism, "I don't know about this *Kunst* thing, it sounds a little homoerotic." The Virgin explains that *Kunst* is German for art and *Waffen* means weapon, your art is your weapon. Carmelita accepts the Virgin's prophecy, and at that very moment she decides to make art her life.

There is much to unpack from this skit. Performing Virgen de la Cobre drag is perhaps that ultimate *choteo* of "authority" for a pious Catholic Cuban or the syncretic practitioner of Santería. That authority in this instance is not only the Virgin but also a national symbol. The Cuban Revolution is also satirized in this monologue when Carmelita is told that it is not her revolution. I suggest that this statement connotes, through the extravagant mockery of *choteo*, a powerful disidentification with the Cuban revolution. The situation for left-leaning Cuban-Americans in the United States is a difficult one. Any critique of the Cuban Revolution instantly opens up Cuban-Americans to the charge that they are exactly like the right-wing anticommunist groups that dominate U.S. Cuban-American politics. Carmelita's realization (what some would call an abandonment) that this is not her revolution, and that she is instead fighting a revolutionary struggle for the recognition of the dignity of Third World women everywhere, is the sober political kernel at the center of the *choteo* joke. Carmelita is disidentifying with the revolution, not rejecting it and not embracing it without reservations. Instead, she sees her progressive politics anchored in gender struggles across the Third World. In asserting this agenda, Carmelita resists the pull of programmatic Cuban exile politics. She wishes to transcend the murky politics around the island and instead embrace issues of gender and identity that have been given secondary status by the revolution. It should be stressed that the prioritizing of gender politics does not mean the total abandonment of the revolution's politics and achievements in overturning class hierarchies.

The remark that she will only become an international superstar after Robert Redford discovers Latinos in *The Milagro Beanfield War* indicates the ways in which U.S. Latinas and Latinos are "discovered" by mainstream culture. That Latinas can only ascend to superstardom after having the road paved for them by aging Hollywood stars like Redford and vehicles like *The Milagro Beanfield War* is the everyday reality of U.S. Latinas/los in the media. Carmelita's quip is a *choteo* attack on this reality, exposing the racist working of the entertainment industry and the way in which performers of color are contained, limited, and exploited within that industry.

Once the performance artist adopts her mantra "your *Kunst* is your *Waffen*" she then proceeds to do a trilingual medley that weaves German and Cuban songs
together. Her repertoire includes the folk classic “Guantanamera,” “Qué será, será,” and “Oh, Tannenbaum.” This musical number is a choteo of multiculturalism, internationalism, and hybridity, topics that are treated with deadly seriousness elsewhere. Carmelita’s cracking voice and bogus accent point out the incoherency of such politics. Choteo revels in the chaotic, the ambivalent, the “untidy.” In this case, choteo elucidates the ambivalent, complicated, mixed-up, and jumbled nature of the hybrid self through this comical medley.

Carmelita’s performance can be read alongside Gloria Anzaldúa’s description of the culture-crossing new mestiza. For Anzaldúa, the queer is the “supreme crosseer of cultures,” because

homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come in all colors, classes and races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews and Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials. It is to transfer ideas from one culture to another. Colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; have always been at the forefront (although sometimes in the closet) of all liberation struggles and have survived them despite all odds.30

I hesitate to fully embrace Anzaldúa’s formulation because I worry that it contains the potential for being too celebratory of queer diversity, and in doing so elides the recalcitrant racisms and phobias that are still present throughout queer culture. I see Carmelita’s border-crossing medley as understanding these risks and, through choteo, both celebrating what can be emancipatory about crossing borders and identifications and mocking this very practice, foregrounding what can be potentially disastrous, ridiculous, and even toxic about these connecting strategies.

Performing the Hybrid Self

In this chapter, I have risked setting up a dichotomy where the intractable connections between lesbian identity and Cuban ethnicity are discussed in wildly divergent terms, thus setting up a false divide between the two identity coordinates. My intention has not been to consign camp style to lesbian subjectivity and suggest that choteo functions only as a strategy to read Cuban identity. Instead, I want to suggest how Carmelita’s is a hybrid self; by better understanding her via her performance of this hybridized self, we can begin to make inroads toward an understanding of the survivalist practice of dyke self-fabrication. Her choteo style is campy and choteo is inflected in her campiness. Carmelita does not hesitate to remind her audience of her various identity markers: she lists nightclub performer, beauty queen, intellectual, political activist, superintendent, and performance artiste. To this we can add camp queen, diva, choteadona, female impersonator, male impersonator, lesbian, cubana en exilio, off-key songstress, and Carmen Miranda clone. All of these roles, identifications, and routines compose Carmelita Tropicana’s hybrid self.
It is important to specify that the mode of hybridity that Carmelita is representative of is a survivalist strain of self-production. Carmelita’s work is not a celebration of a fixed hybrid identity. It is not a style of internationalism or cosmopolitanism. Carmelita’s hybridity is enacted through performance in much the same way that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam describe the hybrid subject’s theatricality. “The Hybrid diasporic subject is confronted with the ‘theatrical’ challenge of moving, as it were, among the diverse performative modes of sharply contrasting cultural and ideological worlds.”

Griggers reminds us that

[c]ultural mappings of lesbian bodies will also have to include intermingling among minorities. These specific sites of mixing and transformation will shape the political stakes and the political strategies for lesbian-feminist-queer-nation alliance and any possible alliance between that configuration and ethnic minorities. Take the case, from the 1950’s to the present, of lesbians becoming only with much difficulty lesbian-feminists and then becoming, after even more struggle, lesbian-feminists of color (these hybridities were always present, of course, but for years remained invisible within the minority social bodies of feminism or African-Americanism or Hispanic-Americanism). The history of this particular struggle over the intermingling of minoritarian social bodies is entirely representative of the dilemmas facing the traditional political notion of identity politics grounded in a totalized, stable, fixed subject.

Lesbians of color have complicated reductionist and antiracist understandings of what lesbian identity might be. Carmelita, who is a cultural production herself, always appearing in character, defies notions of a fixed subjectivity. Her queer and cubana body is unstable and fragmented; it registers on its surface the intermingling of the identity bits that make up her performances and persona, because she appears and participates in various forms of media (film, theater, more experimental performances) always within character, undermining notions of authenticity and realness in favor of queer self-making practices. This self is not limited to the one performance persona. Drag identities such as Pingalito, who is a persona that is layered over the already fictional construct of Carmelita, contribute to her queerly fabricated self. Through the character of Pingalito, Carmelita assimilates and appropriates theatrical and performance practices from the world of gay male subcultures.

Troyano’s film, as I have argued, is also a hodgepodge of different styles, influences, and genre. Its hybridity is a queer one that lets it crisscross from genres like the women in prison film to the Latina American melodrama, from scenes like the lesbian activist protest to a nightclub cabaret. It ultimately reasserts through the three siblings of different races the diversity and complexity of U.S. Latina/o identities. The sharp contrast between Sophia’s gold door-knocker earrings and Carmelita’s super high-heel sneakers reminds one of the multiplicity of personal styles that also fall under the hybrid category of the U.S. Latina.
Carmelita Tropicana. Photo by Dona Ann McAdams.
Troyano’s film and the piece of (cultural) work that is Carmelita are instances in which dominant culture is mimicked, mocked, and finally worked until its raw material can be recycled to ends that are female, Latina, and queer-affirmative. Popular forms are disidentified with, which means parodied with campy extravagance or heckled by this mode of dissidence for majoritarian culture. The spectator is left with a gaudy spectacle that affirms self-subjectivities that are both Latina and queer. These productions, in turn, remind us that identity politics does not need only to be rooted in essentialized notions of the self and simplistic understanding of resistance, but rather that it is essentially a politics of hybridity that works within and outside the dominant public sphere, and in doing so contests the ascendant racial, sexual, and class stricutures.