Chavela Vargas: Challenging Beyond the Music

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"'Empecé cuando no debía, y voy a terminar cuando no deba también;'" this is what Chavela Vargas once said about her career in ranchera music (Alvarado 19). It means, "I began when I shouldn't have, and I will finish when I shouldn't as well." This reference to her advanced age is also a perfect representation of the social conventions she challenged in post-revolutionary Mexico. A legendary singer of ranchera music, the traditional folk music of Mexico, Vargas is an icon of Mexican culture. Vargas was not a typical ranchera singer, however, but a revolutionary figure who challenged standards of gender, sexuality, and age in the ranchera scene. Although Vargas herself was not Mexican, la mexicanidad (or Mexicanness) that she expressed was the essence of her identity and career. To understand the importance of Vargas's role in ranchera music, one must first understand ranchera music.

Ranchera music is related to the popular genre of mariachi. Mariachi is traditional Mexican music typically consisting of an ensemble wearing "traje de charro" and playing trumpets, guitars, and other stringed instruments. In contrast, ranchera typically consists of a single soloist, singing and playing a guitar. This type of folk music normally broaches subject matter such as lost love, and emotion is the most important aspect of the style. During the post-revolutionary period, ranchera was dominated by men. For example, José Alfredo Jiménez was one of the most famous ranchera singers of the time and is still considered a founder of the genre (Mulholland 248).

Although the terms "ranchera" and "mariachi" directly identify the styles of music, the sense of nationalism associated with these styles should be explored. Through music, the ranchera represented gender archetypes and thus became an important aspect of Mexican cultural identity, or rather, of the artistic and political national identity. This sense of patriotic traditionalism is marked by strict adherence to gender roles. For example, "el charro" is an archetype that demonstrates ideal masculinity. He is a *macho*, strong man, but courts women in a gentlemanly manner. Another dimension of this archetype is that he cannot express emotions perceived as feminine, such as sadness, lest it be taken as a sign of weakness. The only acceptable manner for the expression of such emotions is through music. His counterpart, "la china poblana," is the ideal *mestiza* and the romantic partner of the charro. She is a beautiful woman of the countryside: a pure and innocent girl, yet a good wife. Vargas did not embody either of these archetypes yet still had an exceptionally successful career. She was converted into an idol, or rather "la ídola," which was her nickname.

Vargas succeeded despite multiple identities; she was not the ideal ranchera for many reasons. First, she was a woman. Although there have been many famous ranchera women, it was not traditional in mariachi culture that a woman would sing folk music. As previously stated, many of the songs broached the subject of a lost female love. The role of women in ranchera was to be the object of affection, not the singer. Another aspect of Vargas's identity that contradicted her success was her gender expression. Throughout her life, Vargas shattered gender norms and, accordingly, faced hatred and isolation in her small, conservative hometown in Costa Rica. For this reason, Vargas had a complicated relationship with her country of origin. Her brother described what she was like as a girl of twelve, "montaba a caballo, a pelo, sin silla" or "riding a horse, bareback, without a saddle" (Le Franc 30). This image perfectly embodies the unique soul of Vargas: engaging in behavior not traditionally feminine, and perhaps dangerous, without fear. She moved to Mexico when she was only seventeen years old, eventually finding her success. Her artistic persona was very masculine in a patriarchal sense: she drank tequila, smoked, and wore the "jorongo," traditional masculine garb. Another example of her rejection of stereotypes was her refusal to change the pronouns in her songs traditionally

performed by men. Her performances were highly sexualized, and she never tried to hide the fact that she sang about erotic love for another woman.

It was an open secret that Vargas was a lesbian. Although she did not announce it publicly until she was eighty years old, many of her fans suspected. Curiously, Vargas never attempted to hide her sexuality in an era when homosexuality was certainly not accepted in Mexico. Vargas "identified with a masculinized eroticism, grabbing her crotch in performances" without fear of judgment (Knights 482-83). Her lesbianism was amplified by the fact that Vargas was transparent in her singing about women. It is important to keep in mind the culture of ranchera was extremely heteronormative. Anyone who did not fit the archetypes of the charro and china poblana was not accepted. So how is it possible that Vargas was famous and "la ídola" if the culture was so strictly traditional? Perhaps one should consider what was most important to ranchera music. As Mary-Lee Mulholland wrote in "*Mariachi*, Myths and *Mestizaje*: Popular Culture and Mexican National Identity," the value of the mariachi presentation resided in the "ability to express an authentic sentimentality (thus an authentic mexicanidad)" (257). Emotion is the most important aspect, and Vargas's voice was full of it. A masculine-presenting lesbian was capable of challenging the perceptions of the Mexican people through her raw talent for expression.

Interestingly, Vargas, a Mexican legend, was, in fact, from Costa Rica. Due to her difficult childhood in Costa Rica, she rejected her country of origin. In choosing Mexico as her new country, she identified with and personified the nation. This aspect of her identity complemented the political climate of the era, the peak of Mexican nationalism. After the Mexican Revolution, there was a movement to establish pride in Mexican culture through the arts. Vargas was a part of this movement and thus developed relationships with famous nationalist artists such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. In fact, Vargas had a romantic affair with Frida Kahlo (Ruiz-Alfaro 17). Perhaps this relationship is not surprising, given that the two were both subversive artists that never quite fit the norms of society. The Mexican nationalism exhibited by Vargas facilitated her success, despite her country of origin. Just a few decades following this era,

Vargas achieved great fame with the release of the song "Macorina" in 1961.

The launch of Vargas's success through the song "Macorina" began to change the popular conception of Mexican identity, broadening it to encompass more diversity. "Macorina" made Vargas famous. Nearly overnight, the butch lesbian from a conservative village in Costa Rica became a great star in Mexico. Furthermore, the song that cemented her fame explored a romantic relationship between two women. "Macorina" was originally recorded by Abelardo Barroso, a Cuban singer. The titular character refers to a real person: María Calvo Nodarse. The original song "tells the tragic life story of María Calvo Nodarse, an elegant and famous high-class prostitute of La Habana, Cuba, who was also the first woman to receive a driver's license" (Malaver 277). This version of "Macorina" is upbeat, featuring drums, flutes, and a chorus of happy voices. The lyrics are frivolous in nature; Barroso sings of the cost of gasoline that La Macorina uses to drive her car. In contrast, Vargas's version has a distinctly tragic tone stemming from the poem on which Vargas's version is based. Alfonso Camín, a Spanish poet, inspired by Barroso's song, wrote a poem about the mythical figure of Macorina. The lines written by Camín are as jovial as those of Barroso, but Vargas's interpretation creates a distinctly somber feeling. Accompanied only by a guitar, Vargas's voice is equally full of passion and grief. Although Vargas did not write the lyrics of the song, her interpretation, in combination with her rebellion against the gender norms of the era, give new meaning to the poem.

The song "Macorina" is marked by three important elements: sexuality, love, and grief. The three combine to tell the story of the life and, in the ranchera style, the lost love of Vargas. Sexuality is not suppressed in this song. Although Mexico did not tolerate homosexual identities during this era, Vargas did not attempt to hide her identity. An example of this blatant sexuality can be found in the refrain of the song: "ponme la mano aquí, Macorina" or "put your hand on me here, Macorina" (Vargas). This line is repeated many times throughout the song. One can imagine where on the body Vargas is referring to, but even if one could not, Vargas left nothing to the imagination in her presentation of the song. As Alex Voisine writes in "*Cogiendo en luto*: Chavela Vargas and the Erotic Politics of Grief," "Chavela's placing of her hands over her vagina… functions

in her music as a way of speaking wordlessly, allowing her to exude excessively queer sensuality" (284).

While sexuality plays an important role in Vargas's song, the piece does not deal with eroticism alone. It is easy to focus on lines that enumerate queer sexuality, a transgression of the era, but the lyrics also clearly express a pure love. Twice in the song, Vargas refers to a "danzón," a romantic type of Cuban partner dance that became popular in Mexico in the twentieth century. This danzón had great significance for the singer, being symbolic of the times when La Macorina and her lover were together. In an era when lesbian relationships were neither accepted nor legal, each danzón became an impossible joy. For this reason, the character of La Macorina in Vargas's version is more humanized than in other versions. One can imagine La Macorina as a tragic lover instead of a symbol of sex and wealth.

Although the song is brimming with sexuality and love, there is a profound sadness that lingers within its lyrics as well. There are two reasons for this: grief is a distinct mark of the ranchera genre, and Vargas sings of a love that would not be accepted in reality. Her love of women was accepted in performance alone. Playing a butch role was only seen as spectacle; Vargas's life was sufficient evidence of this fact. She was nearly exiled from Costa Rica for her gender expression and sexuality, while the audience in Mexico accepted her for her talent and showmanship. The lines "después el amanecer / que de mis brazos te lleva / y yo sin saber qué hacer" or "after the dawn / that takes you from my arms / I do not know what to do" demonstrate her talent for heartrending expression. Mourning a lost love is a typical theme of the ranchera but is normally expressed by a male singer. Although Vargas disrupted this norm, the profound sadness that she expressed captivated Mexican audiences.

The types of relationships shown in the song "Macorina" were more than a show for Vargas. Her entire life she was rejected for her untraditional sexuality. After leaving Costa Rica, she was forced to become what Alex Voisine calls a "sexiliada" or "queer migrant" (279). Despite her pariah status, Vargas found other artists with whom she could identify, such as Frida Kahlo. As mentioned previously, she formed an intimate relationship with Kahlo in the 1940s. Vargas's autobiography, *Y si quieres saber de mi pasado*, includes a chapter that "Chavela dedicates…to the love relationship she

maintained with Frida Kahlo" (Ruiz-Alfaro 17). Many decades later, Vargas appeared in the 2002 movie *Frida* (directed by Julie Taymor) at a pivotal moment after Diego Rivera asks Kahlo for a divorce. Although the details of the relationship between Kahlo and Vargas are not shown in the film, her appearance in this moment serves an important function. It provides an image of Vargas as a guide through Kahlo's pain separating from Rivera, to which there was some truth. As Voisine writes, the representation of the relationship between the two women featured "erotic sustenance in grief, given to Frida while the two were lovers" after her divorce (289).

The overt and public lesbianism of Vargas was significant in Mexico as well as other countries. "Macorina's" popularity was evidence of Vargas's impact; she began to change the way that the Mexican people viewed different gender identities encompassing mexicanidad. Although Vargas never uttered the word "lesbian" during the peak of her fame in the 1960s, her success as a subversive performer provided hope for a more progressive Mexico. During this period, there was pervasive and violent persecution of the LGBT community. Vargas gave visibility and humanized this oppressed community. According to Sofía Ruiz-Alfaro in "Out in the Jungle: The Queer World of Chavela Vargas," the release of "Macorina" in 1961 allowed the song to become "a lesbian anthem that endowed her [Vargas] with the transnational status of being… 'the queen' of a generation of female singers … who appeared before the Stonewall era" (17). There can be no doubt that countries beyond Mexico were impacted beyond the world of music. Vargas's coming out occurred during a critical moment for LGBT rights in Spain. When she announced her sexuality for the first time in 2000, she had "[the] objective of opening a venue for debating the situation of gays and lesbians in Spain" (Ruiz-Alfaro 19). The right of marriage equality was being argued during this era in Spain, and when a beloved star affirmed her support of this right, public support increased as well.

Although Vargas's multiple identities could have impeded her success, these identities made her all the more famous. Given that Vargas challenged the norms of ranchera music and Mexican culture at large, she possessed an element of mystery that attracted more attention. Despite the rejection that Vargas faced at the hands of her birth country, she found an entire world to challenge and change.

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