

Sara García: Sapphic Romance in Mexican Golden Age Filmmaking

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Abstract: Mexican Golden Age Cinema materializes the narratives of identity, unity and morality that became the obligated point of reference to understand stability and mexicaness during the post-revolutionary period. Hence, film stars evolved into cultural icons that embodied the representation of patriarchal order as a synonym for nationalism. However, dissident depictions that challenged carefully tailored heteronormative roles were as much a part of the post-revolutionary reality as was the attempt to manufacture a utopic heterosexual family on screen that functioned as a metaphor for national reunification under the law of the father/president of the Mexican Republic. Subsequently, Sara García's queer performativity of her quintessential mother and grandmother highlights fissures in the effort to naturalize sexual passivity and heterosexual motherhood as the core of Mexican women identity. Furthermore, García took advantage of her romanticized butch characters in order to revert lesbian invisibility in movies where she portrait roles that exemplified sapphic households. Not very far from her own reality, García's queer women of a certain age, involved in female marriages, contested the post-revolutionary discourse of stability and mexicaness even in the heteronormative realm of Golden Age Filmmaking.

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I SANG to women gathered round;
Forth from my own heart-springs
Welled out the passion; of the pain
I sang if the beloved in vain
Is sighed for—when
They stood untouched, as at the sound
Of unfamiliar things,
Oh, then my heart turned cold, and then
I dropt my wings.

Long Ago Michael Field

1917 represented an important breakthrough in Mexican culture. This is the year when the Political Constitution that officially ended the Mexican Revolution was signed; this is also the year when the film industry took off after its precarious beginning in the middle of the civil war and this is also the year when a young actress by the name of Sara García (1895-1980) appeared on screen for the first time. From that moment on, García's name would be forever bounded with Mexican Golden Age Cinema. In the beginning, she became the most sublime representation of motherhood. However, as time passed by, her quintessential character evolved into a bold grandmother who signaled queer cracks within the official post-revolutionary discourse of national reconstruction that naturalized heterosexuality as the base for social stability.

The beginning of the twentieth century in Mexico proved to be a conflictive time. The civil war from 1910 inaugurated a new era with the promise of freeing the country from the Porfirio Díaz dictatorship[1] that had lasted a little over thirty years. Under the command of Díaz, underprivileged groups, which in fact represented the majority of the Mexican population, had to pay in the form of semi-slavery the ideals of *orden y progreso* [order and growth] abstracted from the European positivist approach. Thus, order was kept through totalitarianism and the systematic exploitation of indigenous groups built the infrastructure of the country.

These groups of farmers and former slaves comprised the Mexican Revolution under the command of Francisco Villa and Emiliano Zapata, revolutionary leaders from the north and south rebel troops, and they integrated the poorly organized ranks of what was called *la bola*, fighting squads in which there was little concern for perpetuating intact the binary of gender construction or sexuality regulations. The exigencies of survival left little room for social restrictions that also recalled the memories of injustice during the dictatorship.

The Revolution was thus a time for experimentation with non-heteronormative ways to rethink gender and sexual identity. Such queering of the oftentimes misunderstood macho[2] Revolution has been an unavoidable topic for both fiction, based upon commonly known facts, and historiographical archives. Pedro Zamora's *Por debajo del agua*[3] (2002) explores the transvestism in the battlefield. In this novel, Hugo Estrada cross-dresses as a soldadera[4] in order to follow his lover Pablo Aguirre even into battle. Hugo falls in love with Pablo when they are both teenagers, and then decides to become the "woman" that Pablo had always wanted, after a sexual encounter with a young prostitute named Isabel, just like Hugo's late twin sister. This is how Hugo/Isabel embodies the sexual awakening

that his twin sister was never able to experience, because she is thought to have been killed at a young age. At the same time, Hugo challenges the naturalization of a binary to define gender because “Hugo e Isabel se conocieron en un orgasmo [Hugo and Isabel met during an orgasm]” (90); hence embodying a sexual expression not limited to identities or sexual restrictions.

In *Por debajo del agua*, Zamora portrays a cross-dressing case that would have gone unnoticed in the middle of a chaotic situation. Nonetheless, he also depicts the general state of political turmoil, outside the battlefield, that allows sexual freedom to overpower social convention and economic control in order to outstrip aristocratic honor. Hugo/Isabel belonged to a conservative family. However, when the patriarch of his family had to be saved from bankruptcy, the fact that it was a former prostitute by the name of Marga who came up with the money had to be overlooked. Several years his senior, Marga was Hugo’s elder brother Carlos’s lover. This situation crystalizes the general state of a nation where the desire to keep up appearances is surpassed by the need to survive.

On the other hand, Marga’s power is also an example of the achievement of women in the Revolution. This was the period in Mexican history when freedom became a reality for women from marginal groups because freedom of speech had previously only been the privilege of middle-class intellectuals or artists. However, the liberties obtained by women came at a high price. Julia Tuñón explains that “Daily life was precarious for women, and abduction and rape were commonplace. Consequently, many women, especially the well-off, fled the country” (86).the ones who stayed could avoid the Revolution. In every possible way, the chaotic times forced women to leave their private place in society. Tuñón lists several positions held by women regardless of their political views. “Women took part as couriers, spies, employees, arms and munitions runners, uniform and flag seamstresses, secretaries, journalists, nurses—all decision-making roles” (90-1).

The traditional role of women had changed and no other function than the *soldadera* reflected more graphically such a change. Out of their own volition or by force, *soldaderas* became the full support of the entire movement (they were present on both sides of the conflict). Their tasks extended from feeding their families to engaging in battle. In addition, the heterosexual oppression forced upon their bodies as receptacles for men’s pleasure and bearers of the offspring was finally shattered. *Soldaderas* could exchange partners at will, use sexual favors as currency, or dispense altogether with the presence of men. “[T]he war forced women to work together with others, which, among some sectors, was quite unusual... the ideal model of family privacy was broken” (88). Actually, it was the whole structure of the heteronormative family that had been shaken to its core in public. There were mothers joined with others in order to keep their children alive, and cross-dressing fighters holding key position with all the privileges dispensed to men, including a *soldadera* to satisfy their sexual desires.

In *Las soldaderas* (1999), Elena Poniatowska lists some cases of women dressed up as men, who made a name for themselves because of their courage and tenacity in battle. According to Poniatowska, Carmen Amelia Robles took advantage of an androgynous body in order to cross-dress as a male soldier and became a coronel, holding a gun in one hand and a cigar in the other. Encarnación Mares (Chonita) would tame wild horses, and even deepen her voice to ditch feminine conventions. Petra Ruiz was known for her volatile temper and exceptional aim, hence gaining the nickname of *echa balas*[5]. One outstanding

aspect of “Pedro Ruiz,” her alias, was the fact that she used her reputation as a prodigious shooter in order to rescue a damsel in distress and claim her for herself.

These are only a few of countless examples of women challenging the invisibility of the lesbian experience at the beginning of the twentieth century in Mexican society. However, after the civil war ended, sexual dissidence went back to the private domain. Post-revolutionary discourse emphasized the reconstruction of the country through the reinterpretation of nationalism and the naturalization of heterosexuality as the only means to achieve social stability. While the purpose of the official discourse was to eradicate the barbaric image of Mexico in the international scene, the Revolution was transformed into a domesticated narrative that would be used as a point of convergence for antagonistic political factions. At the same time, revolutionary public sexual liberties were ostracized once more by moral conduct codes inherited from the Porfiriato. Consequently, this was a rather contradictory time in Mexican history. On one hand the political, economical, and cultural factions sought to leave the barbaric revolutionary phase behind in aims to reach out for modernity, but on the other, obsolete norms meant to naturalize heterosexuality were reclaimed from the previous period of tyrannical oppression.

The post-revolutionary discourse was spread through several cultural products. In literature it was present in the writing of Mariano Azuela (1873-1952), Martín Luis Guzmán (1887-1976), Rafael F. Muñoz (1899-1972) and Francisco L. Urquiza (1891-1969), the writers of the novel of the Revolution, who wrote graphic descriptions of the barbaric revolutionary chaos, which even when wrapped up in romantic nationalism, reflected indeed their own experiences as children. What’s more, the narratives of national unity were the main topic found in the work of Diego Rivera (1886-1957), José Clemente Orozco (1883-1949) and David Alfaro Siqueiros (1896-1974), the great Mexican muralists, whose sense of nationalism remained untouched even when the artists were influenced by European aesthetic trends. However, the most effective resource at the service of the official discourse was the promising film industry. In fact it was through films that audiences finally learned what it meant to be Mexican.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, the film industry in Mexico was mainly committed to disseminating official ideologies. Firstly, it was Porfirio Díaz who used films as a way to keep himself current in the eyes of the whole country. Secondly, cinema would become the best resource to register and manipulate events according to political agendas. And finally, once the Revolution ended, films became the symbolic representation of the narratives that the post-revolutionary discourse fed on: modernity, nationalism, and heteronormativity. The development of motion pictures *per se* represented the ideal of modernity lacking in Mexican society, and the themes chosen by the producers and film directors addressed nationalism and heteronormativity by depicting the heterosexual family as the only source of stability, progress, and *Mexicanidad*, as well as a metaphor of national unity.

In order to achieve these goals the creators opted for romance instead of force. By moving away from the Porfiriato oppression and the violence of the Revolution, film directors and producer adopted the nineteenth-century Latin American novel structure that illustrates romance and heterosexual love as a metaphor for the consolidation of a discourse of national identity that would

locate an erotics of politics, to show how a variety of novel national ideas are ostensibly grounded in “natural” heterosexual love and in the marriages that provided a figure for apparently nonviolent consolidation during internecine conflicts [...] It will be evident that many romances strive toward socially convenient marriages and that, despite their variety, the ideal states their project are rather hierarchical. (Sommer 6)

Thus, the artificial romance created on screen was materialized by a select group of actors and actresses who, at first, became iconographic figures, and who in time evolved into legends that at once adopted and contextualized the Hollywood star system. Those who played the roles that supported the romantic notion of *Mexicanidad* emerged as the mimetic representation of the social sectors that deserve to be part of the national heteronormative family under the law and protection of the father/president. On the contrary, “less deserving” marginal groups were depicted as pathetic warnings towards transgression to the patriarchal order and were interpreted by well-known actors lacking stardom status. Thus, the image of Pedro Infante (1917-57) represented the ideal of the Mexican macho who perpetuates the patriarchal hierarchy, Dolores del Río (1905-83) was the loving wife/slave that calmed all anxieties generated from the State’s necessity of reproduction and renovation after the civil war, and Sara García became the bearer of tradition and convention and was forever known as “the granny,” or a woman of a certain age who apparently contributes to maintaining the narrative of heterosexual social order.

However, Sara García’s acting created a space for the performativity of non-conventional representations of gender that challenged the naturalization of the construction of an exclusive binary of gender and the existence of a legitimate heterosexual identity. The ambiguity of her image –a distinguished lady dressed in Victorian fashion with a handgun in one hand and a cigar in the other– exemplifies that a simple gender division of masculine and feminine with an exclusive heterosexual identity proves to be inadequate to categorize every single character, hence acknowledging the continuum of diverse gender and sexual identities even in the realm of utopic film representations of Mexican heteronormative society. Moreover, García’s queer representation of deliberate heterosexual characters disarticulated the discourse that she was supposed to perpetuate, yet still kept her status as a movie star and national icon.

Sara García was not the only actress who challenged the heteronormative construction of gender by means of a transgressive performativity within her acting work, but she was the only one who did it without causing unease or suspicion. García’s queer performativity was rooted in an industry where different archetypes of female performance were clearly tailored. For example, there was María Félix (1914-2002), the man eater; Ninón Sevilla (1921), the tragic sensual exotic dancer cold-shouldered by society; or Sasha Montenegro (1945), the cheerful, prostitute who lived in the vicious night scene of Mexico City of her own volition, and then, a somewhat peculiar granny.

García challenged heteronormativity within and outside the screen. Even though she is better known for her films, she also worked in theater, television, radio, and graphic novels. In theater she became part of the powerful group of women who built a flourishing thespian industry during the first decades of the twentieth century in Mexico. García was given the opportunity to ripen her unique acting skills uncensored in companies owned and directed by divas who reshaped the cultural scene in public, such as Virginia Fábregas

(1871-1950), Prudencia Grifell (1879-1970), María Navarro, María Tubau (1854-1914), and the sisters Isabelita Blanch (1906-85) and Anita Blanch (1910-83). In television, she was the hostess of the variety show *Media hora con la abuela* (1952) for the XEW-TV network, during a time when only men had that privilege. In radio she was able to ensure her stardom through a sagacious mind for business that enabled her to capitalize on her already iconographic granny role. Finally in the 60s, García appeared in a fotonovela series entitled *Doña Sara García, la mera mera*, in which she became the solo narrator of the adventures of Chucho el Roto and Ojo de Vidrio. García looked like her usual butch granny self, in control of two popular Robin Hood-like male power symbols.

Even when her characters were those of mothers and grandmothers, her performances and character choices were atypical. For example, when she started to interpret mothers she was young enough to pursue starring roles as a leading lady. However, she felt very comfortable altering her appearance to look the part even to the point of sacrificing fourteen healthy teeth in order to age her still youthful features. When she was 39 years old she did the casting for the role of the grandmother in Luis de Vargas's play *Mi Abuelita la Pobre* (1934). The producers and directors of the play didn't want to hire her as the main lead because she was still very young for the part. However, after her audacious actions and accurate characterization of a granny, fellow actors, producers and audience acknowledged her professionalism and tenacity, thus earning her respect and recognition as a zealous actress.

Making herself look older than she actually was would have been considered to be professional suicide, since the 30s was a key decade for the development of the film star industry in Mexico. But in the end, her roles as older women helped her establish a name for herself in a yet unstable industry, even outshining young actresses with leading parts. It was in 1932 when Antonio Moreno's *Santa* had amazed the audiences, who were able to listen to the actors' voices in perfect tune with the images for the first time. Consequently, the industry required native actors with native accents in order to keep captivating the audience. This new twist represented an opportunity for a mainly Spanish-speaking industry. However, it was imperative to continue to incorporate technical and aesthetic schemes from Hollywood, the closest and most influential cinematic reference. Among these loans of ideas from North American cinema was the adoption of the Star System, and with it the same attitude towards aging: desexualization and invisibility, especially for women.

It could be speculated that García would have had a preference for roles of mothers and grandmothers because they represented a guaranteed source of income. Either in theatre or in film, Mexican melodrama is constructed around the suffering mother. Just as it is necessary to have a leading lady and a leading man to reaffirm the naturalization of heteronormativity, it is imperative to have a motherly figure in Golden Age Cinema. Yet, while representing elder characters, García was able to challenge the understanding of motherhood as the exclusive right of heterosexual women, border the limits of heterosexuality, and above all evade gender restrictions.

In films such as *Los tres García* (1947), its sequel *Vuelven los García* (1947), and *Dicen que soy mujeriego* (1948), Sara García portrays a butch grandmother who happens to be a queer matriarch. The queerization of her character results from the inconsistency in the performativity of female gender. Her characterization of the quintessential motherly figure is that of a distinguished lady of a certain age in Victorian fashion who smokes cigars,

shoots guns, curses, and competes with her grandsons even at objectifying the same women who legitimized the boys' heterosexual identity, thus revealing her lesbian desire. Mothers like García

threaten the traditional structure of the family as the male role is deleted and childbearing [or child upbringing in this case] becomes the result of a purely female choice. Including lesbian experiences expands the meaning of motherhood and challenges the assumption that a woman's biology predetermines her subordinate role in the traditional family and in society generally. Lesbian motherhood exposes the social creation of gender; it illustrated the possibility of self-definition and of organizing alternative family structures that are removed from traditional one-mother/one-father model. (qtd. in Hequembourg[6] 156)

As a butch granny it is understood that she might have had a husband; it is for sure that she bore offspring, because even at an elder age she is still in charge of her grandsons' education; yet any indication of the father becomes a ghostly presence. Nevertheless, she continues to fulfill the role of mother, guide, and protector to her grandsons, surpassing the ever-missing mother/father family model while keeping the peace in her microcosmos, oftentimes materialized at the hacienda.

This kind of transgression, in a time when mothers were only meant to suffer and perpetuate heteronormative moral values in Mexican Golden Age Cinema, was by far an outstanding occurrence, especially because her character also romanticized her butch performativity as a strong tempered woman with a "hidden" tender heart that suited Mexican sentimentalism. This is how her butch representation on screen became her most memorable role, even when she queered her own interpretation of the revolutionary process, because she demystified the Porfiriato and the macho Mexican Revolution by portraying a Victorian soldadera. Neither conditions ever acknowledged women exercising their sexuality and constructing their own gender identity independently from the official discourse of heteronormativity.

Just as the representation of the soldadera became a romantic synonym of female self-sacrifice in favor of the national traditional family model continuity, Victorian depiction became the paramount of decency and heterosexuality in Mexican Golden Age Cinema. However, both conceptions could not be further from reality. As previously mentioned in this essay, soldaderas enjoyed sexual and social agency, reconfiguring traditional family roles, and Porfiriato or Victorian times did not represent an interruption in the existence of sexual diversity in Mexico. Indeed, there was a well-known incident that took place during the Porfiriato that has become the point of departure for gay genealogy studies. It was the incident of the 41s.

On November 18th, 1901, police burst onto a private residence located down Paz Street in Mexico City. There were presumably 42 men, half of them cross-dressing in woman's clothes. Forty-one out of the 42 were arrested and humiliated for their behavior, while the infamous 42nd attendee is thought to have been excluded because he was Porfirio Díaz's own son-in-law. Even when Salvador Novo's *La estatua de sal* (1945) traces a genealogy of the gay experience in Mexico, it is only after this scandal that is possible to talk about a gay culture in Mexico. Before that,

La primera concepción moderna sobre la homosexualidad masculina en México se debe al prototipo del dandi europeo, que es similar a la loca Mexicana –afeminado, endeble, apático: monóculo, guantes, bastón y un anillo llamativo en cada uno de sus delicados dedos–.

[The first modern conception of male homosexuality in Mexico was the image of the European Dandy, which is similar to the Mexican queen –effeminate, unstable, disinterested: monocle, gloves, baton and a flashy ring for each one of his delicate fingers] (Schuessler 155)

Another paramount episode in gay genealogy was a group of artists and intellectuals, who were particularly active during the 20s, 30s, and 40s, publishing their own work and other kindred artists' in a magazine called *Contemporáneos* (1928-31). The "Contemporaries"[7] challenged official narratives of sexual identity and gender while experimenting with the modern artistic approaches flowing between Latin America and Europe. Even when Salvador Novo (1904-74), Xavier Villaurutia (1903-50), and Carlos Pellicer (1897-1977) made no effort to conceal their gay identity and the rest of the group defended the individual freedom by embracing the philosophical works of André Gide (Martínez 61), they still had to comply with a heteronormative society. In "Los 41 y la gran redada" Monsiváis asserts that

Los gays de sociedad o del sector cultural guardan las apariencias, suelen casarse y tener hijos. Un soltero no únicamente levanta sospechas: también traiciona a la Naturaleza, que es toda fertilidad, y de allí que al célibe se le exija la virginidad profesional o la monomanía prostibularia.

[Gays in high society or from cultural sectors keep up appearances. They marry and have children. A single man not only raises suspicions: he also betrays Nature, which is nothing but fertility, hence it is demanded from bachelors either professional virginity or a single pathological need for the brothel.] (23)

On the other hand, women enjoyed a certain freedom to explore lesbian relationships, since Victorian codes of conduct would not punish intimacy between female friends. In *Between Women* (1966) Sharon Marcus states that either married or single, "[t]he Victorian gender system, however strict its constraints, provided women latitude through female friendships, giving them room to roam without radically changing the normative rules governing gender." (27) In other words, the incapacity to conceive an intimate relationship in any other terms than genitality, submission, and reproduction opened a space for women to build an intimate and secret community outside the restrictions of men, yet still within heteronormative society.

This indulgent approach in society translates as a patronizing attitude on screen. Golden Age Cinema in Mexico depicted nothing but Victorian models of conduct inasmuch that the existence of these communities of women portray the desirable behavior for women and were also thought to be a strategy to prevent heterosexual acts of

transgression. This is how female boarding schools, convents, and spinster cohabitation households became the representation of the insurance of virginity and purity in movies, overlooking the existence of transgressive female marriages even on screen. In fact, Marcus insists on the fact that not even heteronormative marriage could get in the way of female marriage, since the latter could be practiced in public. Unlike men, who had to marry and keep their homoerotic life private, married women were encouraged to have friends who would be able to satisfy the intimate needs that husbands couldn't or wouldn't even care to attend to. Necessities that in Golden Age Cinema were referred to as *cosas de mujeres* [women's issues] were not to be understood by male supremacy. Hence, women "could indulge the opportunity to display affection and experience pleasurable physical contact outside marriage without any loss of respectability." (57) That is why this license shared by single women could in time develop into an unrestricted romantic lesbian bond materialized in

[F]emale marriages [which] created relationships that, like legal marriage, did the work assigned to sexuality in the nineteenth century: the management of shared households, the transmission of property, the expression of emotional and religious affect, and the development and care of the self. (Marcus 194)

There is no better example of this kind of public, unnoticed transgression than Sara García's performance as a distinguished Victorian single lady in *Las señoritas Vivanco* (1959), its sequel *El proceso de las señoritas Vivanco* (1961), *La tercera palabra* (1956), and *La casa del farol rojo* (1971). In the first movie Sara García and Prudencia Grifell portray two cunning ladies of a certain age who take turns to pull all kinds of frauds in order to keep up their status and foster their orphan niece. Hortencia (García) and Teresa (Grifell) Vivanco's representation of Victorian decency and wealth is nothing but decadence. In times when society bets for modernity, deception is the only option they find to catch up with the new times as an allegory for their own queer relationship. Now, there are several aspects in the relationship between the sisters that depict what Marcus refers to as a female marriage.

For starters, they equally support the needs of the household and raise their late skirt-chaser brother's abandoned daughter. When the movie begins it is stated that the mischievous behavior of their only brother has led them to bankruptcy, to the point that they are putting their majestic residence up for rent in order to support their aristocratic social status. However, in spite of their financial predicament they make exorbitant demands on the prospective English tenants, thus embodying post-revolutionary antagonistic position in regards to the empowerment of foreign bourgeoisie and new European current of thoughts, both represented by the English couple. The sisters are sure that the couple will agree to all their requests, and wait for an answer. However, instead of any news from any future tenant, they make a dramatic discovery of an abandoned baby at the entrance of their house, with a note from a mother pleading for their decency and good-hearted nature to look after the child.

Suddenly they become the penniless, same-sex parents of a little girl, who will ever since call them *mamá* Hortencia and *mamá* Teresa [mother Hortencia and mother Teresa]. In order to provide for her family, Hortencia comes up with a plan to "retrieve" the Vivanco

family jewels, lost to the satisfaction of their late bother's sexual needs by his lover, a cabaret singer. García as Hortencia takes a job as an assistant to the singer and steals her family jewels back. When she returns to her home she makes up a story about a lost nephew, "Albertito," who has come up with the money to save the house, rescue their beloved things, and support the child. When they run out of money, it is Teresa's turn to "go see Albertito," which became a code for go steal some money. Taking advantage of her aristocratic upbringing, Teresa takes a job as a French-speaking governess of a nouveau riche couple's children, and ends up stealing an significant amount of money from the couple's house.

In the sequel, *El proceso de las señoritas Vivanco*, the sisters are caught and sent to prison. However, not only do they manage to leave the prison at their will, and accidentally grow marihuana, but also they construct a community of women who handle life away from any male influence. Actually, the whole female population doing time in jail becomes part of a microcosm where the Vivanco ladies are the axles for the social dynamics. Somewhat, this female marriage reinstates the sense of stability lost by prisoners when sentenced to spend time separately from heteronormative society.

In *La tercera palabra*,^[8] García and Grifell also interpret a female marriage, only instead of raising a daughter together, they became the parents of a savage-like boy who grows into a wild man, tamed only by a female teacher personally chosen by Matilde (García) and Angelina (Grifell). In this story their relationship is slightly less balanced than in their characterization of the Vivanco ladies because Matilde is more rational than the daydreamer Angelina. However, they equally share the responsibility to provide for their nephew's physical and emotional wellbeing.

The roles represented in these three movies coincide in several points that challenge the carefully selected heterosexual stories in Golden Age Cinema. Firstly there is no conventional family; instead, there is a female marriage nurturing a child. In all three films the image of the heteronormative mother is absent, as is the agency of any male figure. The Vivanco ladies make up a phantasmagoric nephew who proves to be irrelevant for the course of their actions and the resting male characters are easily manipulated by the ingenious couple. In addition in *La tercera palabra*, the male protagonist is the one embodying nature as pure feeling. Rationality comes from either García's and Grifell's characters or from the young female teacher, who in time will become the sensible head of this already atypical family.

Furthermore, there is another remarkable trait that sets these characters apart from any other aunts, grandmothers or mothers sharing the camera frame: the sisters wear identical outfits. Even when this part of the characterization could be understood as a romantic recall of a childlike attribute, which also indicates that their bodies have reminded untouched by men, identical outfits also suggest mirroring feelings or love between equals, regardless of their kinship. In fact,

Smith-Rosenberg implied that before the advent of sexual orientations, no lines were drawn separating friends, lovers, and family members. To prove the existence of a homogeneous "Female world and ritual," Smith-Rosenberg indiscriminately cited letters exchanged between sisters, cousins, mothers, daughters, sisters-in-law, married and single women, women of the same age and women of very different ages, lovers, friendly ex-lovers, distraught ex-

lovers, and friends with reciprocal and nonreciprocal crushes who never became lovers. (Marcus 31)

Later on, García filmed *La casa del farol rojo*[9] (1971). In this film, lesbian relationships between the actresses, even when still not declared, were portrayed in a less elusive manner. Unlike in previous films, Doña Sara, García's character, lives in a female marriage with her housekeeper; there is no longer space for ambiguity. As the solo provider, Doña Sara depends economically on a kitchen garden that grows on a piece of land inherited from her late husband. To her detriment, the government has forced her to give up that piece of land because it blocks the planned extension of a road. Once again, García portrays a woman who decides to rent what is left of her majestic mansion in order to make ends meet and provide for her family.

In an unexpected turn of events, the tenants are prostitutes who organize parties and, as the camera frames indicate, who a voyeuristic lesbian pleasure in watching each other perform for male clients. Moreover, Doña Sara makes revealing remarks when she welcomes some of the female guests as she states the fact that in the parties held at her house there is the possibility to satisfy either heterosexual or lesbian desire. Supposedly, Doña Sara didn't know about her tenants' profession. However, this assumption is questioned throughout the film because it is impossible to overlook the camaraderie, love and complicity between Doña Sara, her housekeeper and both veteran and young prostitutes.

García's most noticeable roles are those of a butch, ill-tempered grandmother. Nevertheless, she also portrayed tearjerker representations of a suffering mother and managed to imprint her own queerness into the performativity of conventional female gender characters shaped by the post-revolutionary narratives in over 150 films. In fact, however queer, García managed to romanticize her roles calling upon the sensitivity of the audience. The Vivanco sisters embody the brilliance of an untouched Sappho; in *La tercera palabra* Matilde and Angelina are a couple of nymphs whose kindness touches upon the sublime, and in *La casa del farol rojo* the strong bond between all the women becomes an imaginary island of Lesbos.

García's subliminal cinematic rush with Sappho, nymphs and Lesbos echoed her personal life. Just like in most of her most unforgettable characterizations, she raised her only child by herself in a shared household with her Rosario: the woman who was her companion, accomplice, housekeeper, financial adviser and, of course, her beloved. Sara and Rosario González Cuenca seem to have been destined to share their lives since they were newborns. Fernando Muñoz details that Sara's and Rosario's parents, all of them Spanish immigrants, were travelling from Cuba to Mexico with their respective newborn daughters when unfortunate circumstances forced them to become acquainted. Sara's mother was in no condition to look after her baby because

[e]l viaje y el miedo de perder a la bebé han trastornado el organismo de Felipa, quien no puede amantar a su hija. Lo hace en su lugar Francisca Cuenca de González, sellando sin saberlo una hermandad entre las pequeñas Rosario y Sara que se mantendría hasta el final de sus vidas.

[the journey and fear to lose her baby had affected Felipa's health, who is incapable to breastfeed her daughter. Francisca Cuenca de Gonzalez (Rosario's mother) steps up to the task, unaware that her actions marked the beginning of a sisterhood bound between Sara and Rosario that would last for the rest of their lives.] (12)

After this incident, they went on to live separate lives. Sara became an orphan at a very young age and was left under the care of the nuns from El Colegio de San Ignacio de Loyola Vizcaínas. She grew up at this institution and became a drawing instructor. However, after she took up acting she had to quit her position because the profession of an actress was not suitable for an institution where only young ladies of unquestionable lineage were accepted. Once Sara left the school she pursued a full time acting career mainly combining theatre and films. In fact, it was while she was working for the María Navarro theatre company that she married Fernando Ibáñez, with whom she gave birth to her only daughter Fernanda. However, three years after, Sara filed for divorce, an audacious action at that time, and became a single mother. But not for long:

Un día Sara entró a la corsetería La Europea, en la calle Uruguay, y se sorprendió al ser atendida por su amiga de la infancia, Rosario González Cuenca. Rosario se acababa de divorciar, y al enterarse de la situación de su amiga le ofreció su casa –ahora ubicada en la calle de Mesones–, donde vivía con su madre, su hermana Blanca y su cuñado. Así, Sara ingresó al seno de la familia González Cuenca. Rosario y Sara realizaron un pacto de honor, amor, fraternidad y hermandad indisoluble.

[One day Sara entered La Europea corsetry garments shop down Uruguay Street and was amazed to have been helped by her childhood friend Rosario Gonzalez Cuenca. Rosario has just divorced and when she learnt about Sara's situation she offered Sara her home to stay –currently located on Mesones Street– where she lived with her mother, her sister Blanca and her brother in law. This is how Sara became part of the Gonzalez Cuenca family. Rosario and Sara made a binding pack of honor, love, solidarity and sisterhood] (25)

“Sister,” “friend,” and “personal assistant” were some of the euphemisms used for Rosario's actual role in Sara's life. Indeed Rosario was all that for Sara, but she was also her life partner, and they were engaged in a female marriage. In fact,

the essential question is not whether these women had genital contact and can therefore be defined as heterosexuality or homosexual. The twentieth century tendency to view human love and sexuality within a dichotomized universe of deviance and normality, genality and platonic love, [...] fundamentally distorts the nature of these women's emotional interaction. (Smith-Rosenberg 8)

The essential matter is that Sara and Rosario's lesbian relationship continues to be an example of Mexican society's denial even when confronted with an irrefutable situation. This is because the very existence of the lesbian experience challenges the core of a female national identity molded after the Virgin of Guadalupe's asexual virtue. Hence, "Lesbians are elsewhere" because they contest "culturally dominant understandings of gender and sexuality." (Jagose 1). This is the reason why, even after Golden Age Cinema is long gone, there is no publication about the life Sara García that touches upon the subject without resorting to understatements or ambiguity.

Besides narrating the incident from the ship that united Rosario and Sara's lives since the earliest possible age, Fernando Muñoz includes a section in his biographic study of García about Rosario in terms of *La amiga fiel* [the loyal friend]. In this section Muñoz talks about "La extraña relación en que Rosario aparecía como su víctima y ella como el verdugo, juego en el que Sara conseguía ser el centro constante de atracción" [the odd relationship in which Rosario seemed to be the victim and Sara her tormentor as part of a game where Sara would manage to become the center of attention] (70) Muñoz equates their relationship to that of an abusive heterosexual couple. However, in the next section, when he includes information about the actress' death, he cites Rosario, who reflects the actual nature of their relationship: "Fue más que una hermana, fue madre, amiga, compañera... fue todo." [She was my sister, my mother, my friend, my partner... my everything] (72).

In 1999 Juan Antonio de la Riva made the documentary *Sara García: La abuelita del cine nacional*. The emphasis of this work is the characterization of motherly figures and how such figures contributed to building the national identity in Mexico. Rosario is only mentioned as García's best friend and companion. In 2000, *Somos*, an entertainment magazine, devoted a special edition to Sara García. This issue was the result of collaborative efforts, and in the section entitled "Una Mirada a la intimidad de Sara" [A glance into Sara's intimacy], Héctor Argente publishes a previous interview with the actress in which he carefully includes the description of an intimate moment between the couple. Right in the middle of an answer,

Rosario (a quien ha presentado como hermana, pero sabemos que las une una larga, fraterna e íntima amistad), se acerca y, con amorosa prontitud, le acomoda el chal, le pone una cobija sobre las piernas, la abriga, la mimó. Doña Sara no se queda atrás: Chayito, Chiquita, no camines tanto, descansa....

[Rosario (whom Sara has introduced as her sister, but we know that they are bounded by a long, fraternal and intimate friendship), approaches and with loving watchfulness fixes her shawl, lays a blanket over her legs, wraps her up, pampers her. Doña Sara doesn't fall short: Chayito, baby, don't walk so much, rest...] (83)

This description contradicts Muñoz's initial approach in regards to the relationship. However, Muñoz's inability to understand Sara's lesbian relationship with Rosario apart from heteronormative patterns is shared by Rafael Aviña, who in 2004 simplified García's quintessential character as a *machorra*[10] in terms of "la imposibilidad femenina de llegar a ser hombre 'de verdad'" [the female impossibility to be a 'real' man] (155). Finally in

2010, TV Azteca aired an episode of the series *La historia detrás del mito* about Sara García. This documentary was announced as a space for controversies surrounding the life and career of Sara García. However, when the time came to talk about her relationship with Rosario, the same heteronormative concerns for denial continued to be the majority of the interviewees' declarations.

In the end, García's lesbian experience as a national icon on the screen or as a woman sharing her life with Rosario was part of what Carlos Monsiváis calls the lesbian ghetto of dissimulation "que comienza a integrarse en los años treinta con profesionistas, actrices, profesoras, funcionarias. [...] El gueto es un mundo diminuto, cerrado que en ocasiones gira en torno a una celebridad" [that began to form in the 30s between professionals, actresses, teachers and public servants. (...) The ghetto is a tiny close world that revolves around a celebrity] (*Que se abra esa puerta*). Just as the fact that García was surrounded by an influential group of atypical women Mimí Derba (1888-1953), founder of Azteca Films; Emma Roldán (1893-1978), García's buddy, mostly remembered for her interpretation of a butch mother in *Los hijos de María Morales* (1952) or Dolores del Río (1905-83), with whom García had a close friendship and shared philanthropic, artistic and social events. Whether García's lesbianism is acknowledged or not is not as relevant as the fact that she was able to follow the path of Sappho by challenging heterosexuality on screen and lesbian invisibility in society, yet remaining untouchable as the romantic embodiment of motherhood and national identity in the times when Mexicans' dreams were shaped by the silver screen.

[1] Also known as Porfiriato, this was the Victorian Era in Mexico, during a period of time that started in 1876 and ended in 1911.

[2] This term is being used in this essay in the same fashion that Carlos Monsiváis would understand it in *Salvador Novo: lo marginal al centro* (2004) [*Salvador Novo: the marginal at the center*]:

Si la Revolución crea espacios de desarrollo de una sensibilidad distinta, también los revolucionarios se jactan de un machismo rampante. (No uso homofobia, por ser un término no correspondiente a la época que ya califica negativamente el odio irracional al homosexual. Antes, cuando todos la comparte, no tiene caso especificar) Los climas de guerra demandan valentía, suprimen el respeto a los derechos humanos (por demás casi inexistente) y mantiene una tesis: un maricón ofende a la hombría, a México, a la Revolución.

[In as much as the Revolution opens spaces to develop a different awareness, the freedom fighters boast about and exaggerated machismo. (I do not use homophobia, for the term does not correspond to the times, when it already describes the irrational hatred for homosexuals. Long ago, when all share it, there is no need to specify) the times of war demand bravery, they suppress observance of human rights (by far in-existent) and perpetuate a thesis: a fag offends manhood, Mexico, the Revolution.] (41)

[3] *Por debajo del Agua* is considered to be a novel from the Revolution in the same fashion as Mariano Azuela's *Los de abajo* (1916); Martín Luis Guzmán's *El águila y la serpiente* (1928) and *La sombra del caudillo* (1929); Francisco Luis Urquiza's *Tropa Vieja* or Rafael F. Muñoz' *¡Vámonos con Pancho Villa!* (1931). In spite of the fact that there are decades between Zamora's novel and the other writers' *Por debajo del Agua* also has the civil war as its main theme.

[4] According to Elena Poniatowska, “during every war or invasions, soldados (soldiers) would use their ‘soldada’ (feminine form of the word soldado) to hire as their server. The woman would go to the headquarters to collect her sueldo (wage) or soldada (word derived from salario [salary] y sueldo). Hence the term soldadera.” (20)

[5] Literary, the one that shoots bullets indiscriminately because of a volatile temper.

[6] Quoted from Jenny Wald in “Outlaw Mothers” (1997).

[7] Jorge Cuesta (1903-42), José Gorostiza (1901-73), Roberto Montenegro (1887-1968), Salvador Novo (1904-74), Bernardo Ortiz Montellano (1899-1949), Gilberto Owen (1904-52), Carlos Pellicer (1897-1977), Antonieta Rivas Mercado (1900-31), Manuel Rodríguez Lozano (1896-1971), Jaime Torres Bodet (1902-74) and Xavier Villaurrutia (1903-50).

[8] God being the first, death the second, and love the third. This film is an adaptation by Luis Alcoriza from Alejandro Casola’s play *La tercera palabra*.

[9] Even when this movie was filmed in 1971 and Mexican Golden Age Cinema has the end of the 50s or beginning of the 60s as its culmination date, *La casa del farol rojo* still follows the tragic melodramatic aesthetics set up by *Santa* in 1932.

[10] In Mexican jargon a Machorra is a pejorative term to describe a woman who challenges female gender construction to its core because her incapacity to perpetuate the species and heteronormative discourse is an eminent treat.

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