

DRAGGING NARCOCULTURA IN HERBERT SIGUENZA'S *BAD HOMBRES/GOOD WIVES*

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ABSTRACT

Theatre on the borderlands is a genre of performance traditionally entrenched in rigid definitions of gender, but the genre also contains a refutation of the universalizing mantle of whiteness and a firm retention of Chicano cultural specificity. This tension between resistance and compulsion extends to the genre's rigid gender roles. Borderlands theatre both holds to and responds to gender roles. Herbert Siguenza's work in *Bad Hombres/Good Wives*, a theatrical comedy performed October 3-27, 2019 at San Diego Repertory Theatre, is a prime example of this gendered tension within Borderlands theatre. The play's engagement of drag as a reinforcement of gender roles stands in contrast to its queering of narcocultura. The problematic use of drag in this play expands on notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, but as a dramatic piece *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* fails to create either a queer space or a space transgressive of borders.

KEYWORDS: Borderlands, gender, Latinx, masculinity, theatre.

1. PLAYWRIGHT HERBERT SIGUENZA

As a playwright, Herbert Siguenza brings his comedic expertise honed over 35 years creating work as a part of Culture Clash, the preeminent Chicano comedy troupe to his playwrighting¹. The group's historical use of drag factors heavily into and reflects Siguenza's personal skill in drag performances which he integrates often into his independent playwriting and performances. Culture Clash creates material collectively and the authorship of their work is often credited under their shared company name². Their style of political comedic satire targets injustice, oppression, and bigotry through sharp insights framed in sketches and full-length plays. They call themselves equal opportunity offenders and do not hesitate from turning their satire on their own identity as Latino activists. In *The Return of Che*, a sketch from their sketch anthology play *Bowl of Beings*, the group pokes fun at the spectrum of overzealous to tepid commitment of some Chicano activists. The group is widely recognized as *veteranos*, celebrated legacy artists, in the Latinx Theatre community for their extensive history of touring, unyielding commitment to activist values, and legacy of producing culturally specific work in predominantly white regional theatres across the US through interview-based work. In San Diego, local audiences respond

warmly to the “Culture Clash boys,” and their shows are often sprinkled with regionally specific references—references to Chula Vista during San Diego shows always come with uproarious laughter (Personal Interview).

As a troupe composed exclusively of men for over 30 years, drag performances have long been part of the group’s performance style. In their more contemporary pieces women have been brought on to shows as guests, but the women are consistently framed as guests both in the script and in promotional material. Drag features prominently in the *Bordertown* “Adelita” scene, originally written for *Bordertown*, produced 1998, and reproduced for *Bordertown Now*, produced 2018, and *Culture Clash (Still) in America*, produced 2020. Although the Adelita scene has been performed in three separate productions across twenty years, the scene has only shifted slightly from its original formation. In the scene, Adelita shares her journey from identifying as a gay man to a woman. In *Bordertown Now* Sabina Zúñiga Varela joined the Culture Clash men and played a number of women in the show, but Varela did not play the role of Adelita. In productions where the troupe is not joined by a woman, all the women characters are played by the troupe in drag.

Culture Clash’s early use of drag set them apart from other contemporary and preexisting groups like Chicano Secret Service, Latins Anonymous and Royal Chicano Air Force. The Culture Clash men’s adroit mimicry of women was not based on a full transformation through extensive costuming and makeup; rather their costumes were simple wigs thrown on for one sketch and then quickly abandoned to play a different character in another. In their sketches and plays they often switch quickly between characters—quickly pulling on and off wigs, hats, dresses, and pants to become any number of different characters. The Culture Clash men did not become women: they retained the identifiers that signaled their masculinity and layered new signals of femininity on top. The breadth and range of the characters they played had the effect of continually reminding the audience of the performer’s virtuosity. These three men could play a vast array of over thirty characters of varied gender, age, accent, ethnicity. Rather than stripping or erasing their own identities their chameleon-like character shifts underscore their firm positioning as Chicano men.

Culture Clash retained their Chicano cultural specificity in their creative work, they did not take on a mantle of whiteness in their work. In *Bordertown* the men play Latinx and non-Latinx characters and take on new accents with each new character, but throughout every transformation there is a slight reminder of the performer's identity, a subtle California lilt that emerges in the soft vowels as Ric Salinas and Herbert Siguenza play recent immigrants from The Philippines and Uganda. The retention of their specific identity was radical, it was a refutation to move towards a ubiquitous white universality. The retention of the soft vowels served to signal that the performer's natural accent was not a barrier to be overcome, that their specific position in the world as Chicano men could be a valid position from which to examine the world.

As an independent playwright, Herbert Siguenza's work shares Culture Clash commitment to social activism through humor. His solo authored work has a tight sense of comedic timing and centers on the Latinx community. Siguenza also has a focus on adaptation of classic work. Before *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* Siguenza adapted another Moliere classic *The Imaginary Invalid* for the San Diego Repertory Theatre into his script *Manifest Destinitis*, a play about a Californio whose invented illness is aggravated by the undocumented US citizens sneaking into Alta California, Mexico in the 1800s. Siguenza created a drag housekeeper role in *Manifest Destinitis* and played the role himself.

2. THE THEORY AND HISTORY OF DRAG IN THEATRE

The use of drag in Borderlands theatre draws on a wider history and theory of drag performance. Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* lays the groundwork for much of modern discourse on the intersections of gender and performance³. Butler frames gender through performance and uses drag as a heightened example of quotidian gender performance. Butler's work argues for a specific understanding that theatrical, performative, gender bending serves to solidify and confirm gender roles and expectations.

When discussing drag, many theorists focus on this potential for drag to call into question gender norms. "Drag queening, as a form of queer identification, celebration, and pride, it was specifically about tearing down gender walls" (Heller xi). In *Unmaking Mimesis*,

Elin Diamond reads drag as a way of highlighting the constrictive and constructed nature of gender roles. She specifically looks at the cross casting in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud 9* in which cis-men actors are cast as cis-women characters. For Diamond, the feminine role played through a man's body highlights the restrictive nature of women's gender roles through highlighting the physical gestures of gender women traditionally perform in the layering of the gestures on the bodies of men.

Other theorists look at how drag can be used to reify gender roles. Sue Ellen Case in her article "Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts" looks at how the portrayal of women's characters by men actors "had nothing to do with actual women or altering women's cultural positions, but was, in fact, a method of reinforcing stratified institutional sexism" (Case 321-322). Greek theatre did not allow women to appear on stage, so all women characters were played by men. In fact, this tradition of drag appears in several early theatres. In her 1985 article "Gender Impersonation Onstage: Destroying or Maintaining the Mirror of Gender Roles," Jill Dolan reads drag as antithetical to the dismantling of gender norms. "While drag queening may illuminate the constructed nature of feminine gender, Dolan concludes, drag audiences will not associate this with the plight of women forced into certain gender roles. Rather, both performer and audience simply take a mocking pleasure in the artifice of a man choosing to do things that only women have to do" (Heller 27). The simplistic mocking pleasure centers the impact of the dragging above the intent of the performance and thereby the drag reinforces the woman character's lower social status.

3. CARNIVALESQUE AND GROTESQUE REPRESENTATION IN THEATRE

The relationship between Borderlands theatre and drag highlights the complex and often troubled ways that cultures construct, maintain, change and struggle over the meaning and roles of gender. Drag, or the theatrical performance of a gender by someone whose quotidian identity differs from the gender being performed on stage, enters the modern lexicon in the early 19th century in connection to men dressing as women (Henly). As culture and contexts shift across time and space the contemporary meaning of drag in production has

come to describe a wide range of subversive and carnivalesque performances across the spectrum of gendered performance (Bakhtin & Holquist). And yet, as they always do, times and thus contexts have changed. In a historical moment where trans identities are more visible, politicized, and in some cases legally protected, the casting of a heteronormative cis-man as a woman in a theatrical production signifies differently than it did in previous eras and now perhaps signifies problematically.

Rather than simply critique performances of cis-men playing transwomen this article seeks to provide a heuristic for reading the politics of drag in contemporary local theatre by drawing on the theory of the carnivalesque. Initially theorized by Bakhtin as,

What is suspended [in carnival] first of all is hierarchical structure and all the forms of terror, reverence, piety, and etiquette connected with it--that is, everything resulting from sociohierarchical inequality or any other form of inequality among people (including age) (Bakhtin 1122-23).

While the function of the carnivalesque is the suspension and critique of the rules that govern daily life Bruner's study of social movements that use the carnivalesque complicates the notion that progressively aimed performances of cultural transgression pose a challenge for the nation state (Bruner). While the research demonstrates that when social movements use carnivalesque humor state level actors often fail to "get" the joke and thus, either fail to respond or overreact and thus further legitimize the social movement. However, because the carnivalesque produces an ambiguous moment in which the rules of society are upended the ephemerality of these moments also provide catharsis for and normalize the inequality being parodied (Bruner).

Research in the field of communication shows how the carnivalesque can be effectively mobilized for a variety of movements including; the Women's March in January 2018 which relied on the use of vulgarity and offensive humor as a "flexible affective resource" to influence social change (Graeber et al. 172). The use of parody and the grotesque respectively cite the power structures and normative values under critique and thus carnivalesque performances should not be assumed to be progressive, rather they are potentially transformative. However, liminoid, or artificially produced moments

of liminality, have the potential to make space for the imagining emancipatory worlds, “or to bring a new social reality into being” (Santino 62). Thus, satirical or grotesque performances of drag may produce opportunities for both progressive and normative readings simultaneously.

Of particular importance to understanding drag performances in Latinx borderlands theatre is Bakhtin’s analysis of the radical potential of contemporary art forms, such as theatre, to challenge static and oppressive meanings and power relations. “The temporal model of the world changes radically: it becomes a world where there is no first word (no ideal word), and the final word has not been spoken (Bakhtin & Holquist 30).” The transitory nature of time and the social world that is exposed through the novel forms of art destabilize fixed interpretations of history and meaning. The change brought on by the novel element, which we argue is also true of the use of drag in borderlands theatre, exposes how meaning and truth are socialized (not natural) and are thus up for contestation. Within the context of the theatrical production of Herbert Siguenza’s *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* the character, Armida, is simultaneously grotesque and familiar. Armida’s exaggerated breasts, wide hips and mole function as synecdoche to signal to the type of audience what “kind” of femininity to expect. The “asymmetrical, comic, vulgar, and ugly” (McWilliam 219) mark the body as deviant and thus capable of inviting the audience to participate in deviance while normalizing systems of control.

There is revolutionary potential in theatrical drag because the carnivalesque and ritualesque (Santino) elements of theatrical performance rearranges the temporal and value-laden assumptions of a world based on the “way things have always been” present. Taken to its logical conclusion the work of Bakhtin suggests that rather than have a massifying effect, popular and new forms of artistic expression can be used to expose the artificiality of oppressive gendered formations. The way that the shifting and transitory nature of ritual and theatre produces opportunities for the production of carnivalesque liminality (Turner). The mutability of the theater provides a lens through which to view the world in a constant state of becoming. The text of the play once onstage is created new, again, for the audience. In particular the ephemerality of live theatre means that

while no two performances will be the same, the audience may find themselves in a state of uniformity from time and space and seduced into participating in the creation of alternative modes of being. The use of drag in the play *Bad Hombres/Good Wives*, combined with Siguenza's choice to play a woman can be read as an attempt to play with what folklore expert Stephen Olbrys Gencarella, refers to as the "productively ambiguous tension between carnivalesque and hegemonic impulses despite the performances' design to laugh at rather than with him" (Olbrys Gencarella 241).

4. *BAD HOMBRES/GOOD WIVES*

Herbert Siguenza's *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* premiered and ran October 3-27, 2019⁴ at San Diego Repertory Theatre and was directed by Sam Woodhouse. The script was developed through the 2018 San Diego REP Latinx New Play Festival, through a second workshop at Cygnet Theatre Company in San Diego, California with funds from Bill and Judy Garrett in February 2019. *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* is a contemporary adaptation of Oscar Wilde's 1895 comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* and Moliere's 1666 French farce *School for Wives*. Siguenza sets his adaptation in 1990's Sinaloa, Mexico at the height of the drug cartel power and centers his critique on machismo in Mexican culture.

Don Ernesto, Sinaloa's most powerful drug lord, has been paying for an orphan girl to be raised in a convent and trained to become his perfect wife, and now she is ready to emerge and begin her life as his obedient wife. After chasing his longtime housekeeper deaf Armida—played by Siguenza in drag—around the house with a hammer and a belt, he convinces Armida to pick up Eva, his young new fiancé, at the Culican train station. At the train station Eva meets Mario, a handsome young man and the son of Ernesto's former cartel rival who has just returned from Mexico City for his father's funeral. Eva is instantly enchanted by the sensitive, Shakespeare-quoting young man who saves her from two creepy guys in a Macarena dance battle. Eva lies about meeting anyone and Armida hustles her along to meet Don Ernesto—who is pretending to be Professor Bunburi, a "professor of books" at National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Eva is disappointed in meeting Professor Bunburi but Armida convinces her to give him a shot. Professor Bunburi humiliates Armida and Eva

jumps to her defense chastising Bunburi for his patriarchal privilege and cruelty.

Mario and Don Ernesto meet at Mario's father's funeral, where Lucha Grande, Mario's eye-patched mother, sings a banda song in full-domme regalia. After the funeral Mario sneaks into Eva's room and the pair almost share a kiss when Don Ernesto, disguised as Professor Bunburi comes in and Mario barely escapes unseen. Wearing a leopard negligee, Armida teaches Eva a sexy dance, gives her a banana and a wink, and tells her to practice, a confused Eva shrugs and takes a bite of the banana. In a business meeting Don Ernesto and Mario decide to combine their cartel resources into a united organization, to celebrate Mario reveals he is in love with a girl named Eva and Don Ernesto secretly realizes Mario's Eva is the same person as his Eva so Don Ernesto plans to kill Mario.

Don Ernesto sends two sicarios to kill Mario in his sleep, but Lucha Grande is hiding in Mario's room and takes them out. Don Ernesto goes to the priest to confess trying to kill Mario and Mario goes to the same priest to also confess to wanting to kill Don Ernesto, and the priest declares: "May the best man win"! Don Ernesto sneaks into Mario's homes but is trapped in a pleasure/torture device by Lucha Grande. At the same time, Mario sneaks into Don Ernesto's home and accidentally shoots Eva, but the bullet only lodges in her copy of *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Armida reveals she is not really deaf and the happy young couple go to the church for Eva and Mario to marry. Don Ernesto has been beaten by Lucha Grande and renounces his desire for an obedient wife in preference to Lucha's domination and they too rush off to the church to be married. The priest marries both couples in a late-night ceremony, joining them in matrimony and in business.

The development process for *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* created major character shifts that revealed Borderlands theatre's tenuous and shifting relationship to gender. Armida, Don Ernesto's secretly not deaf housekeeper, is a character who underwent major changes in the development process. In initial drafts of the play, the character was framed as a trans-woman whose transition from man to woman was spurred by a rejection of the violence of narco culture. In the 2018 San Diego REP Latinx New Play Festival the character was performed by a cis-woman, Gabriela Neslon. In the reaction to the

reading the violence perpetrated against Armida by Don Ernesto in the second scene and his casual violence against her played as overly aggressive and more problematic than funny. In the second public reading of the play at Cygnet Theatre, the artistic team of Director Daniel Jaquez, Cygnet Associate Artistic Director Rob Luffty, and Herbert Siguenza initially cast a trans-woman in the Armida role. The character no longer spoke about transitioning based on a rejection of narco violence, and now focused more strongly as a comedic figure. Ultimately, the trans-woman playing the role was replaced by Siguenza in the reading; the woman was unable to provide the comedic timing of the delivery Siguenza wanted to determine if the humor shifts were working. From the reading moving forward towards the 2019 San Diego REP full production, Herbert was cast in the role and the character shifted from a trans-woman to a cis-woman who would be played by a cis-man in drag.

5. DRAG IN *BAD HOMBRES/GOOD WIVES*

Dolan's reading of drag seems most appropriate to the case of Armida in *Bad Hombres/Good Wives*. Described as a woman in the text, Armida was played onstage by a man, Siguenza. As a popular performer and staple at the San Diego Repertory Theatre through his performances with Culture Clash over twenty years at the Rep in which he often played women in drag, Herbert was a large appeal of the play. In casual post-show conversations between the writers and audience members, folks shared that they came to the play with the understanding that they were going to specifically see Siguenza.

The Armida role, or the cross-gender casting of it, did not effectively highlight the constructed nature of gender, or call into question the hegemonic gender binary. Rather, the joke more prominently played off of the assumption of what a woman should be. Siguenza's drag performance defines the limits of femininity by existing outside of it. His Armida is too loud, too big, too ugly to be appropriately feminine. Armida's presence helps to define and highlight the appropriate femininity of the two other women characters, Eva and Lucha; through their strong contrast to Armida and their relatively more subdued humor, the audience recognizes the limitations and boundaries of appropriate feminine expression. The comedy of Armida's character lies in her inability to be properly

feminine, particularly when compared to the young ingenue Eva. One of the primary scenes that brings this distinction to the forefront is when Armida tries to teach Eva how to please a man.

The stage directions that start off the seduction lesson set the tone for how the audience should understand Armida's performance of sexuality: "Armida takes off her robe and she's dressed in a naughty negligée. She is seductive and stupid funny" (*Bad Hombres/ Good Wives* 44). The idea of Armida being a genuinely sexually enticing woman, is mocked as soon as it is asserted. This pattern of humorously undercutting Armida's genuine sexual attractiveness is repeated across the play as are the moments of mockery. The humor of the seduction lesson rests on finding it outrageous that Armida could be attractive and feminine. As she begins her lesson, Armida is stopped by the laughter of her on-stage audience, a mirror to the laughter heard throughout the theatre.

ARMIDA: While your man enjoys his brandy, you dance for him like Salome en el desierto...

Armida does a ridiculous dance! Eva laughs. Armida stops.

Don't laugh, child. This is very serious! (46)

The stage directions "*Armida does a ridiculous dance*" could refer to a variety of things. It could, in fact, refer to Armida's lack of understanding of what a sexy dance looks like. However, the dance Siguenza performed was clearly derived from the tradition of burlesque dance and strip clubs. Armida twerked and grinded her way across the stage as the audience laughed, the moves were then replicated by Eva to a diminished comedic payoff. It was not the moves themselves that were "ridiculous," rather, it was the inappropriateness of the body performing that was the source of humor. Siguenza's ability to perform these moves competently in a man's body enhances the humor of the scene. For a body that is not a woman's body, but which is strongly coded as a man's, to perform the moves associated with women's sexuality was lauded by the audience who responded strongly to this moment with laughter and applause. Siguenza's mastery over and ability to define and elucidate what femininity means is an important part of his performance as Armida⁵.

The audience's laughter at Armida's disrobing at the beginning of this scene made it clear that Siguenza was able to achieve the humor

of this moment. Part of the humor in seeing Armida in a negligee comes from her size. Throughout the play, there are jokes about Armida being a large woman. In an early scene, her boss Don Ernesto comments “You’re super big alright!” (referring to her weight), showing that Armida’s size is a part of her character and supposed to be a source of humor (11). An obsession with Armida’s size is written into the play and is specifically emphasized in this production that cast two petite actresses in the other women’s roles. Armida’s size is part of what makes her inappropriately feminine. The body that is shown in this moment is not Siguenza’s or a womanly body, it is an exaggerated imagining of a woman’s body. Prosthetic breasts and buttocks were added to Siguenza’s body to create an exaggerated and excessive silhouette for Armida. While the other actresses’ costumes emphasize their femininity, Armida’s costume shows that she is excessive in her proportions. Lucha, the older woman character, is dressed in skin-tight heavy-cleavage clothes that show off her body and emphasize her sexuality. Eva is dressed in white flowing dresses which represent her youth and innocence. Armida’s severe pulled back hair and conservative clothing stand in contrast to these other women. She has no place in the Madonna/whore dichotomy that the other women live in. She stands apart from the acceptable women’s characters. Her presence shows the audience what is not allowable for the womanly body.

In Elin Diamond’s reading of cross gender casting in the work of Caryl Churchill, she centers the way this casting practice breaks the theatrical illusion and calls attention to the nature of performance and gender itself. Part of the work that cross gender casting does is make sure that in a Brechtian fashion there is not a seamless quality between character and actor and that the performance itself is constantly highlighted. The character is not what is being watched, but the actor’s performance. This is particularly applicable to this role as Siguenza is a major draw for the regular audience of the theatre. In this idea of representation, Siguenza is centered. The audience is watching him play the role of Armida, rather than watching just the character herself, as they are with the other characters. They are watching Siguenza’s performance of, and commentary on, femininity. As with the plays of the English Renaissance, the woman character is the sole creation of a man, both in writing and performance. Siguenza

uses Armida and his performance to define femininity through a man's lens (Diamond).

Feminist theatre critics Case and Dolan look at the theatrical history of drag as an extension of the patriarchy. In their eyes, it is another way that men get to define and constrict the expectations for women. As Dolan says, "on the vaudeville stages, female impersonators were usually comics who both belittled women and set standards for their dress and behavior" (Dolan). Case comments on a similar move in Classic Greek theatre where all women's roles were played by men. In the English Renaissance, when women were not allowed on the stage, the makeup the boy actors wore helped define English femininity (Poitevin). Siguenza's performance seems to fit well into this theatrical tradition. In a theatre dominated by men, "we find men in control of the mirror, with women looking into it for appropriate reflections. Shining back at them from the male mirror, however, was a socially constructed concept of woman that served the guiding male ideology" (Dolan 8).

While we do not extend to Dolan's conclusion about gay men in drag in this paper, we do find her deconstruction of men's impersonation to be a useful lens for looking at cross gender casting: "Again, the stakes in the gender game aren't as high for these particular gay men. They can easily assume women's roles, knowing that offstage, they wear the clothes of the social elite" (Dolan 8). Here, Dolan is referring to contemporary drag queens performing in queer spaces. Though this does not apply to those who participate in drag queening, it does apply to Siguenza's performance as Armida. This particular notion of drag relies on the concept of passing, and obfuscates the very real lived condition of gay men who participate in drag and do not "pass" for heterosexual men in their everyday lives, unlike Siguenza whose identity as a straight, cis-man is never in question. Drag expands on notions of queerness by revealing boundaries to be permeable and flexible. In contrast, within cross-gender casting, such as Armida in *Bad Hombres/Good Wives*, the boundaries of binary gender are hardened by the enacting of femininity by men actors because they define the terms of femininity through the lens of a man and by a man's body. The position of social power that the men actors hold is never in question and that power is extended into the performance.

Distinctly, drag shows play on the extremes of gender and gender stereotypes, showing them for the falsehoods and constructions that they are. Another important difference between a drag show and a play that includes cross gender casting is the presence of women's bodies presenting as women⁶. The idea of the gender binary is naturalized and held up without question because the presence of women performers playing woman characters alongside Armida provides a stable reference point for gender on the stage. The playfulness of Armida is a tool that serves to reinforce gender boundaries rather than question the nature of gender through constant references to the appropriateness of the "correctly" performed gender of Eva and Lucha. It is the removal of the stability of the referent of "woman" that allows drag shows to be a queer space. In a drag show, all of the performers are participating in gender play. Gender is on display as a concept that is malleable and open to interpretation. There is no stable referent for gender or the idea of the gender binary on the stage. This is one of the primary differences in the type of drag found in *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* and drag queening performed in queer clubs. Rather than creating a space for queerness and gender explorations, the drag in *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* precludes an expansive definition of gender.

6. QUEERING NARCO CULTURE IN *BAD HOMBRES/GOOD WIVES*

Bad Hombres/Good Wives attempts to walk a line between glamorizing and satirizing Narco culture, the Narcos portrayed in the play serve as the butt of most of the play's jokes. One of the most telling examples of how the production plays with the narco aesthetic is the "taxi driver" scene. The lights come up on Leo, a bumbling sicario working for Don Ernesto, standing hands at hips, fourth wall his mirror. As he repeats the famous lines, "you talking to me," first in Spanish and then shifting to English, his accent is comically thick, and the audience responds with a low chuckle. The actor skillfully begins to build on the parody, exaggerating his body language, pulling his shoulders back to further open his bedazzled black button-front shirt down to his belly button, thickening his accent, and the audience responds in kind. By the end of the monologue the audience is fully invested into the narco-aesthetic.

The persistence of Narcocultura is an indication of its strength. Rojas-Sotelo, explains, “narcoculture” was coined by the media and the cultural elite during the height of the drug wars in Colombia (the late 1980s to mid-1990s) to describe the cultural practices of the lower-class/newly rich drug lords” (Rojas Sotelo 217). Like many forms of outsider or “low” culture Narcocultura was very quickly co-opted, commodified, and sold to those people living in the borderlands as an aestheticized and easily identifiable style in countries across the Americas, most abundantly in Mexico. The narco-aesthetic is characterized by flashy and outrageous fashion typically portrayed as an ostentatious mixture of nouveau riche and Ranchero styles; it is young, unsophisticated, and obsessed with peacocking displays of wealth. The proliferation of narco-aesthetics touches deep into both the Mexican and American cultural productions, including music, fashion, TV, Film, and news. For example, *La Reina del Sur* telenovela and then the *Queen of the South* adaptation by the US Network celebrate the drama, fashion, and glamor of Narco life (Quiñones). The rapidly expanding popularity and profitability of the Narco-genre transcends the US-Mexico border and speaks to the banal acceptance of the narcotics trade on both sides of the border. Narcocultura popularity rests to some extent on people’s dissatisfaction and distrust of the Mexican government and in many ways is a dark and perhaps more honest version of the rags to riches narratives that undergird the “American Dream.” The Narco is represented as a self-made rouge who outfoxes an incompetently corrupt legal system and finds a way to succeed against all odds. Those residents of the US Mexico Borderlands who find themselves locked out of the legitimate economy, find a place or can at least identify with the narco narrative. The sensationalized violence of the narcos in narcocultura is excused because of the violence of the state acting on individuals.

However, the global romanization and acceptance of narcocultura belies the violence on which it rests. The use of the term “war” to combat illicit narcotics goes back to the Regan administration’s efforts in the US in the 1980s; Mexico’s war on drugs has been raging alongside the US efforts and has created increased instances of violence, terror and instability throughout the 80s, 90s, and early 2000s. The instability increased further with the 2006 election of Felipe Calderón on the promise of sweeping anti-drug cartel reform.

Despite the longstanding expense in both lives and capital the Drug War has continued past Calderon unabated, with no end in sight. Yet if Foucault's reversal of Clausewitz is correct in noting that War is just politics by other means, then the popularity and persistence of a narcocultura suggest that cartels have opened another front to the drug war by producing ideological and aesthetic discourse that legitimizes their position as a quasi-state actor (Foucault).

Visually, Don Ernesto's clothing and body language are designed to establish his character and the totality of narco machismo as vain, hollow, and weak. Carmen Amon's costume designs pulled inspiration from Versace's 90's designs. The brand's heavy use of chains and leather with a pallet dripping with gold matched perfectly with the ostentation of narco culture. Each character wore a specifically crafted look with ornate details meant to signal power and quick wealth; Mario's pink velvet tuxedo pants, Don Ernesto's low-buttoned Versace print silk dress shirt, and Lucha's bedazzled leather eye-patch are each indications of the character's control in the world. In specific, Lucha's costumes most typify the narco-aesthetic; her opening look is a tight black leather mariachi traje with side leg slits that run from ankle to thigh held together with leather lacing, her matching black leather jacket is covered in coordinating studs and metallic chains worn over a golden bustier, and the look is finished with a gold embroidered and jeweled sombrero. Her look integrates severe masculinity and hyper sexuality all covered in a thick layer of gleaming gold accents. The carnivalesque nature of the performance aesthetic alongside the centrality of drag suggest that the narco-drag enacted both serves to alleviate the audiences anxieties about the narco-state 15 miles to the south of the venue. While at the same time, as is done in carnival normalizing the relationship even as it names the violence committed by narcocultura.

The drag of Armida sits in an uneasy counterpoint with the representation of Narco-masculinity. The narco-drag is a way for the audience to point and look at something that is terrifying and very close, that does so that allows us to live within the bounds of it. It gives the audience just enough space of colonial wokeness within the bounds of narco terrorism to allow the audience to breathe.

Traditionally drag is viewed as the performance of a gender against an assigned gender. In the case of the play *Bad Hombres/Good*

Wives, the carnivalesque nature of the theatrical performance allows for drag to go beyond gender and into the realm of subculture. The narcos, especially the primary antagonist Don Ernesto are fool kings, low-class, venial, bestial, stupid, and yet also powerful. Like other forms of drag narco drag “Relies on the notion that appears on stage is not only not real but appears in contradiction with the performers reality.” The performance of terror and drug fueled violence in the safety of a theatre, transports the audience from a rarified elite space, into revelers and subjects of the Narco-King, allowing them to feel comfort in identifying with cartel members and viewing the characters as sympathetic. The strength of the comedic writing, the use of Latinx music, and the tacky audacity of the narco-aesthetic invite the audience to participate in catharsis for the very imminent violence of the drug trade in the borderlands while sitting in privilege above it. But just as with the case of the fool king in classic carnival, *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* hides and normalizes the violence on which the play is based. In the mode of many farcical plays like the work of Moliere, the production ends with a wedding, the two women leads, have tamed their bad hombres and begin to plan out the future of the cartel “girl boss” style. The ending scenes lean in to pink-wash the violence behind a facade of empowered women hiding their controlling power behind a man.

As the time and cultural milieu changes so does the meaning and possible uses of cultural performances. Though a straight man in a dress may still get laughs, the cultural moment is one where the theatrical tradition of cross gender casting needs to be interrogated for its artistic, practical, and emancipatory function. The problematic use of drag in this play expands on notions of the carnivalesque and the grotesque, but the play fails to create either a queer space or a space transgressive of borders. While the gender binary gets reinforced by the presence of a stable referent in the show’s gender drag, the narco-drag of *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* has no parallel referent on stage. The true referent in the narco/non-narco relationship is the border which exists outside the performance. The banal acceptance of the narcotics trade combined with the audience’s relative safety from the effects of the drug war, seated safely in a velvet chair in a theatre ensconced in a US shopping mall, enables the audience to voyeuristically enjoy the spectacle of narcocultura without having to contend with the violence

narcocultura is based on. The lack of genuine physical violence and substitution of farcical threats from rubber hammers and bullet-less guns sanitizes the danger of narcocultura⁷. Don Ernesto threatens to shoot Armida in the face while pointing a gun at her, yet this threat is laughed at because of the audience's assurance that they are safe from narco violence on the US side of the border.

In the case of both narco and queer drag the liminal moment produced by the play feels transgressive but misses the opportunity for lasting social critique or transformation. The threat of violence fails to produce a sense of real fear in the audience as it is directed towards a straight cis man and initiated by a character whose *machismo* has been a source of ridicule. The reality of gender and cartel violence is so far removed from the picture on stage that it fails to stimulate a critical stance from the audience. The failure resides in part because of the cis-gendered woman actresses whose presence in the play stabilizes gender and makes Herbert's character a disciplinary assault on women who fail to live up to the standards set by the women actors. Conversely the narcos are painstakingly costumed and performed to signify difference yet removed from the violence that maintains that otherness via the US/Mexico Border.

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NOTES

- 1 Culture Clash was founded by Richard Montoya, Ricardo Salinas, Herbert Sigüenza, and José Antonio Burciaga. The protogroup first performed in 1984 for a Cinco de Mayo event at René Yañez's Galería de la Raza/Studio 24 in San Francisco. Originally named "Comedy Fiesta," the early iteration of the group included the Culture Clash founders, Marga Gómez and Monica Palacios. Their work included poetry, spoken word, visual arts, rapping, and activism. In 1988 the group's name shifted to Culture Clash, the members narrowed down to Richard Montoya, Ricardo Salinas, and Herbert Sigüenza, and they took to the road. Culture Clash has performed their original plays at regional theatres across the United States including the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, the Lincoln Center in New York City, the Huntington in Boston, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon, The Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas, the Seattle Repertory Theatre in Seattle, Mark Taper Forum and Pasadena Playhouse in Los Angeles, South Coast Repertory Theatre in Costa Mesa, California, and San Diego Repertory Theatre. This vast range of theatres moves from the largest most prominent national institutions to small-budget store-front theatres, yet in each of these varied venues the performances feel localized and specific. Some of their most recognized works include *The Mission* (1988), *Bordertown* (1998), *American Nights: the Ballad of Juan José* (2012), and *A Bowl of Beings* (1991) which was filmed for PBS's *Great Performances* series in 1992. Culture Clash has also produced multiple commissioned plays derived from for community interviews including *Radio Mambo: Culture Clash Invades Miami* (1994), *Bordertown* (1998), *Nuyorican Stories* (1999), *Mission Magic Mystery Tour* (2001), and *Bordertown Now* (2018). Each of these commissions brought the troupe to the city for an extended time where the troupe would conduct hundreds of hours of interviews with local residents to get a wide sense of the nature of that unique community. The men would then write a play incorporating the language of the interviewees. This style of interview-inspired work became a calling card for the group and demonstrated their strength in writing in the anthology sketch format, skillful comedic mimicry, biting satire, and sharp attentiveness to the nuances of each unique community. Although the

- group has largely created and performed as a theatre troupe, the group had a television show, "Culture Clash," produced by and aired on Fox television network 1993-1995; 30 episodes of the show were produced. The show employed the group's talent for short format sketches and ready satire in pieces like "American Border Gladiators," in which Salinas, playing a Salvadoran immigrant, and Siguenza, playing a Guatemalan homemaker in drag, competed in physical challenges against spandex-covered border gladiators for a green card ("American Border Gladiators").
- 2 The troupe wrote collectively 1984-2002 Their last collective piece was *Chavez Ravine*. New work produced by the group after 2002 is credited as "written by Richard Montoya for Culture Clash." In addition to their collective projects, the group members also created independent projects. Richard Montoya wrote *Water and Power* (2013), Ric Salinas has toured as a performer on *Placas* by Paul Flores (2014) and *57 Chevy* by Cris Franco (2020), and Herbert Siguenza has written biographical plays about Cantiflas and Pablo Picasso, he has also written adaptations of theatrical classics including *El Henry* (2014) an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, and *Manifest Destinitis* (2016) an adaptation of Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid*, and was named a Mellon Foundation Playwright-in-Residence at San Diego Repertory Theatre.
 - 3 Butler relies on definitions set in Esther Newton's 1972 ethnography on drag *Mother Camp: Female impersonators in America*. Drag queening is the play of opposing forces "between 'appearance,' which is female, and 'reality,' or 'essence,' which is male" (101). Newton's text is one of the first in the canon of theoretical writing on drag performance. Building on Newton's definition, Fiona Moore in her chapter "One of the Gals Who's one of the guys: Men, masculinity and drag performance in North America" in the 2005 anthology *Bending Gender* defines drag along similar lines: "Drag, for those not familiar with it, refers in its simplest form to men dressing in female clothing for the purposes of performance" with an emphasis on the exaggerated nature of this performance (103). These definitions reflect a common understanding that what is meant by "drag" is often the same as "drag queening." While, "drag queening" may be the most popular and culturally visible form of drag, it does not encompass the entirety of drag performance. Meredith Heller in her 2020 book *Queering Drag: Redefining the Discourse of Gender Bending* highlights the flexibility of the idea of drag in her definition: "Drag means bending identities like gender, sex, sexual orientation, queering those relationships and those identities" (xii).
 - 4 *Bad Hombres/Good Wives* was written and developed at San Diego Repertory Theatre with the support of the Mellon Foundation's National Playwright Residency Program administered in partnership with HowlRound Theatre Commons.
 - 5 Siguenza justified his decision to play the role of Armida on his belief that a woman could not create the humor of the character as well as he, a man, could; and, if the comedy is to be found in the grotesque version of femininity that he represents and defines through his performance, perhaps this is true.

- 6 In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler goes into the violence that is done by the idea of natural gender. If gender is seen as something “natural” or innate, rather than a performance, it becomes easier to condemn any deviations from the gender binary.
- 7 “DON ERNESTO: Muy bien, Armida. Read my lips. BRING. TWO. BRANDYS. BEFORE. I. SHOOT. YOU. IN. THE. FACE.” (10)