

Adapting Gender: An Introduction

When I began this project in 2007, I was interested in looking at the ways in which women were represented in Mexican film and literature at the close of the twentieth century. I was curious about the relationship between how women are portrayed in mass media and how that translates into, or reflects on, women's real, lived experiences. Confronted with continual news of the decade-long string of *muertas de Juárez* (dead women of Juárez)¹ that the Mexican government seemed to be doing little to resolve, it appeared that, at least collectively, (working) women's bodies were expendable. Contemplating the barrage of television, print, and large-format commercial images that portrayed women as either hypersexualized or happily domestic (and racially homogenous) and, worse, billboards that openly attacked the then-recent measures by the progressive government of Mexico City to decriminalize abortion, I wondered what, if any, gains had been achieved by the social upheaval that came with the student and women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

The harder I looked, though, the more I *did* find pockets of resistance. There were, and are, in fact, people creating art, literature, and film that confronts the still-prevalent homogenizing tendencies of "national" culture. As I began to trace the history of women's participation in the creation of widely disseminated media images, it became apparent that there were a critical number of active women filmmakers in Mexico, many of whom got their start in the 1990s—the so-called "Decade of Change"² in the Mexican film industry. These women largely were graduates of the major film schools who were prepared both professionally and politically to delve into what had historically been an almost exclusively male terrain. I was intrigued to find that many of them focused on complex female characters, using literary works as the basis for their films.

Furthermore, I was curious to discover the relatively limited body of academic research specifically addressing the theory of filmic adaptation in the Mexican industry despite its pervasiveness in practice. As I continued to explore this topic, I found that several of these fiction films by debut female cineastes of this era, in fact, reiterated texts by women writers whose work engaged the feminist struggles that had come to light in the late 1960s and 1970s, and I set to work interrogating the relationships between these texts, confident in my belief that women telling their own, or each other's, stories were bound to produce images, ideas, and representations of themselves that could subvert the symbolic order that relegated women to perform only within rigid binaries: the passive, abnegated mother (previously virginal), or the impious, voracious, bad (active) woman.

I realized that it was not enough to simply recognize that Mexico's media industries (as is the case with every other media industry in the world!) had been historically (and, despite major inroads made by women at all levels, still is) dominated by heterosexual men and a cisgendered male subjectivity that attempted to pass itself off as universal. I felt it was important to examine the ways in which women and queer auteurs collectively began constructing alternative, complex, rich, conflicted gender subjectivities, from within those cultural spaces previously only allotted to heterosexual men, at the *very moment* that such access was made possible.

The consciousness-raising of the student and feminist movements, particularly in Mexico, had wide repercussions in major cultural industries, and many women authors of literature and filmmakers who had come of age in the 1970s were uniquely poised to formulate both coherent critiques of their country's gendered politics and artistically valuable works that would address their own personal and political subject positions. It was in this moment, too, that gay, lesbian, and queer movements began to gain traction and splinter from their feminist roots, leading to multiple identity positions and many fronts of criticism for the status quo in cultural representation.

I was reminded of what French feminist Luce Irigaray suggested: "criticizing patriarchy or phallocracy does not suffice in order to join a culture of two subjects.[. . .] A single criticism cannot succeed in modifying the way of being or of acting of man nor the status of woman" (viii), and I connected this notion of repetition, reiteration, deformation, and subversion with Linda Hutcheon's notion that "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (*Theory* 7). With those ideas in mind, and meditating on Judith Butler's concept of performativity—"the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect it names" (*Bodies* 2)—I began

to envision film adaptation as a tool for gender subversion, a strategy that could be deployed to multiply meaning and critique the existing symbolic order of things, not as a singulative act, but as a reconditioning repetition.

Could filmmakers normalize diverse female and male subjectivities through reiterated representation? Would it look different if men were behind the camera? What if those men were not heterosexual men who reified the heterosexual relationship? Could a shift in genre act to question the normativity of gender in the nationally envisioned subject? I began to consider the subversive potential of adaptation and how such dialogic processes, the interaction between a source text and its reiteration(s), between authors and at times across generations, could be capable of constructing alternate subjectivities that could act as contestations to previously established, reiterated, and regulated stereotypes of the gendered self in the Mexican setting. That is, I began to understand that through repetition and widespread dissemination, mass media had historically aided in the formulation of gendered roles and representations, and by that token, it could be argued that it can offer the same possibility for reversing or deconstructing such insidiously coded behaviors in subsequent generations through conscious acts of *repetitive rebellion*.

Because media images and ideologies can have a lasting impact on the sentimental education of their consumers, establishing long-lasting modes of behavior; because spectacle and nationalism, gendered identity, and government projects have gone hand in hand for as long as Mexico has been a modern nation, in this book, I chose to examine films that not only reflect on the nature of gendered relations within Mexico, but also reiterate previously articulated feminist discourse that promoted women's agency on the national stage. For this study, I chose films that in some way actively critiqued the particularly *Mexican* way of relating and the institutional structures of power that were in place: Busi Cortés's *El secreto de Romelia* (1988), an adaptation of Rosario Castellanos's short novel *El viudo Román* (1964); Sabina Berman and Isabelle Tardán's *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1996), an adaptation of Berman's play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1992); Guita Schyfter's *Novia que te vea* (1993), an adaptation of Rosa Nissán's eponymous novel (1992); and finally Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's *De noche vienes, Esmeralda* (1997), an adaptation of Elena Poniatowska's short story "De noche vienes" (1979).³

I have set forth to examine these adaptations not from the framework of fidelity,⁴ but from the expanded notions of adaptation, offered by such theorists as Robert Stam, Kamilla Elliot, Brian McFarlane, and Linda

Hutcheon, among others, that eschew giving primacy to the literary text or supposing that a purported sameness or equivalency is the cornerstone of a “successful” adaptation. In this way, I propose to address these texts through lateral readings, examining the actual operations taking place in the *process* of the adaptation in order to judge the cultural value of the final *product*.

In no way do I ignore the fact that there are myriad examples of feminist discourse in literature and film that owe nothing to adaptation, carrying on a dialogue through extra- and intertextual manners. I also recognize that adaptation per se need not be a feminist endeavor. Nevertheless, literary texts have been a historical source of inspiration for the Mexican film industry and cinema in general, and here I am examining the ways in which adaptation was and can be deployed as a strategy of cultural resistance, allowing feminist discourse to expand its audience, formulate new conceptions of performed gender, and even potentially open doors for other subaltern discourses, such as queer voices and those of religious or ethnic minorities or subordinate classes within the context of Mexican national cinema.

Finally, in this book, I am specifically aiming to give textual space for polyphony. I engage the work of many Mexican scholars—whose work may not always be translated and has not been readily available to English-language scholars—alongside the work of transnational scholars. This is, in a sense, an effort to not unilaterally impose North American scholarly models onto a Mexican subject, but rather to invite a dialogue, engaging multiple and mutable transnational feminisms, much like the subversive dialogue present in the adaptations herein studied.

Chapter 1: Mexican Feminisms from Literature to Film lays the groundwork for a complex understanding of the multiple intertexts in the films addressed in this book and considers both the process and practice of adaptation in the Mexican context. Here I propose that adaptation can double as feminist praxis given the proper modes of production and argue that through repetition, reiteration, and adaptation, the films studied furthered the growing empowerment of women and the fight for equality in economic, political, reproductive, social, and sentimental terms. The chapter presents a framework for understanding the nexus between nationalist and feminist discourses as well as a contextualization of the cultural milieu of the creators studied. I make specific note of the ways in which official discourses regarding “gender” intersect with film industry practices throughout the history of Mexican film, and how the particular shifts of neoliberal policies, coupled with the institutionalization of feminist perspectives, will give rise to the films in this study that span the decade 1988–1998.

The subsequent chapters examine specific cases of dialogic interactions through adaptations of feminist literary works, examining the “gap” in time, space, and genre, and in so doing, I establish the social universe of the adapted text and its author(s). I discuss the reception and interpretation of the source text and adaptation laterally, in a dialogic manner, and examine the particular operations that occur in the act of adaptation and how new meanings are constructed in the new creation. I approach these rewritings as translation, as variations on a theme, and as palimpsest, not as aggressive appropriation of what does not belong to the other, nor as lesser, derivative forms. Hutcheon reminds us that “an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (*Theory* 9). I posit, therefore, that upon adapting another’s work, these filmmakers enter into a palimpsestuous⁵ relationship, projecting layers upon the prior writing, leaving a trace, decorating the previous body—of literature and cultural archive—through modulations that reinvigorate, update, critique, and imbue it with urgent, present, personal meaning for both the new authors and audiences.

Chapter 2: Rebellious Daughters in *El secreto de Romelia* examines Rosario Castellanos’s feminism of denouncement in the novella *El viudo Román* (1964) and Busi Cortés’s legacy in *El secreto de Romelia* (1988). The temporal distance between the publication of these two texts is significant: almost a quarter century, but the temporal distance in the fictional setting is even greater. Castellanos’s story, set in provincial Comitán, marked by customs but not precise dates, takes place at the early part of the twentieth century, post-Revolution but prior to the centralization of the federal government and the institutionalization of the Revolution, while Cortés’s film returns to another provincial town more than half a century later, marking two temporal and physical spaces: the past, during the Cárdenas presidency (1934–40) and the present, the late 1980s.

Cortés’s shift in title marks deliberate shifts in viewpoint and discourse. Influenced by changes in feminist epistemology and praxis, it moves away from a denouncement of a monolithic masculine discourse and toward the construction of multiple, often oppositional, active female views. I argue that Cortés’s film, while very much rooted in Castellanos’s feminist line of thinking, is also in dialogue with the “third wave” of feminism, which is less focused on women’s “liberation” from men and stifling social mores and much more concerned with self-actualization, career advancement, and the construction of a sex-positive identity of female agency and activity. Moreover, Cortés addresses a radically different political universe, imbuing

her expanded cast of characters with political agency unavailable to Castellanos's characters. Cortés's text works to update Castellanos's feminism for a new generation, paying homage, quite clearly, to her foremother, while forging new arguments and formulating new questions from a different moment in history, enacting sex-positive attitudes and political commitment that resignify what the central question of being a woman in post-1968 Mexico can, and should, be.

Chapter 3: Revolutionary Variations: *Entre (Pancho) Villa y una mujer desnuda* examines theater, film, and performativity as well as self-adaptation in Sabina Berman's stage play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1992) and the film adaptation that she and Isabelle Tardán direct, *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda* (1996). Sabina Berman's play *Entre Villa y una mujer desnuda* was an artful, demythifying, and, indeed, rewriting of history that was wildly successful in Mexico, with 460 consecutive theatrical performances. It was then retired to shoot the film adaptation that Berman and Tardán, her theatrical producer and life partner, would write and rename *Entre Pancho Villa y una mujer desnuda*. While both textual performances evoke and invoke historical figures—Villa, Marx, and Freud, as well as the mythic, nameless, objectified woman—they do so in different ways.⁶ Both theater and film enact a sort of battle of the sexes, but where the national stage is literally and figuratively present in the play, it is the international stage that gets the limelight in the film, whose script has undergone subtle but systematic changes, most notably, the shift of locus of the putative audience. The film eliminates all references to Plutarco Elías Calles, downplaying the role of his granddaughter, Andrea. It also replaces the imagined spaces and reduced universe of theater with recognizable geographical ones in the film, firmly placing the action in Mexico City. The Revolution is examined under a slightly different lens, now more about the international politics, NAFTA, and the discourse of the media, which is self-consciously parodied in the film.

Both the play and the film call into question the authority of History as a discourse, as well as ridiculing and demythifying the iconic figure of Villa and of the "Macho mexicano," but what becomes interesting is how those messages interact and are encoded for different putative audiences, how pseudo-iteration⁷ can offer subversive possibilities, and how the concept of a national self, or the vision of that self, is represented differently for itself than for outsiders.

Chapter 4: Wedding the "Other" in *Novia que te vea* examines Rosa Nissán's novel *Novia que te vea* (1992) and its eponymous adaptation by

Hugo Hiriart, Nissán, and Schyfter; directed by Guita Schyfter (1993) while taking into account repercussion of Nissán's sequel *Hisho que te nazca* (1996). The central focus of the novel is negotiating a Jewish identity within the realm of a Catholic Mexico as well as the substandard treatment of girls among and between the three different diasporic Jewish communities that come together, eventually, in schools, the Athletic Club, and the *Shomer*. Guita Schyfter's background as an Ashkenazi Jew born and raised in Costa Rica and later nationalized Mexican was quite disparate from that of Nissán. Schyfter was quite unfamiliar with the Sephardic culture prior to this project. Working together, however, they envisioned a character, an Ashkenazi friend only alluded in the novel(s), and interwove their two stories—Nissán's and Schyfter's—through the film protagonists, Oshinica and Rifke. Precisely because of these differences between the two authors, the film was able to address the complexities of what being Jewish and Mexican could mean. While Nissán's novel and its sequel, *Hisho que te nazca*, addressed the coming-of-age of her character, Oshinica, in direct conflict with the patriarchal order of Judaism in her family's Sephardic and Mizrahi tradition, by foregrounding the Ashkenazi Rifke's Zionist participation, Schyfter was able to reconcile her characters with the wider culture of student protest in the 1960s while still paying homage to the Ladino language and Sephardic culture so important in Nissán's text. Oshinica and Rifke together will reenact, through dialectic memory, their own adolescence and thus perform their otherness, their own brands of female Jewish Mexican identity, in a dialogic manner.

Chapter 5: Sexual Tensions: Queering Feminism in *De noche vienes*, *Esmeralda* addresses both Elena Poniatowska's sharp critique of the gender inequality present in Mexico's legal structures and its subordination of women through Revolutionary rhetoric in the short story "De noche vienes" (1979) and Jaime Humberto Hermosillo's expansion of this critique to create a New Queer Cinema that explores the intersections of sexual desire and political power in *De noche vienes*, *Esmeralda* (1997). The source story uses a legalistic language in its interrogation of a young Esmeralda Loyden, a nurse accused of bigamy for being married to five different men. Poniatowska draws attention to the double standard present in the practice of the "casa chica" (little house), in which men have multiple households with multiple women and no legal repercussions. Her story engages the language of the Mexican Revolution to show the ways in which women, half a century later, were still not on equal social or political footing. The film adaptation ages Esmeralda, inserting a sly, sexy forty-something María Rojo into the

heart of its narrative, making all but one of her five husbands a “partner in crime” in order to screen a panoply of gender outlaws, sexual “deviants,” and social misfits who advocate for a place to be human and free.

The chapter examines the queering that Jaime Humberto Hermosillo enacts upon reiterating Poniatowska’s story two decades later, in the thick of the neoliberal turn in Mexican cinema. His film stands in solidarity with feminist movements at the same time that it shows the ways in which the rhetoric of feminism has been co-opted, its message diluted, whitewashed, and complicit in the compulsory heterosexuality of nonprofit, academic, and governmental sectors in this new world order. In a world in which AIDS exists, government collusion with the Catholic Church to ignore such a reality can hurt everyone. Hermosillo takes Poniatowska’s respectability and explodes it with campy icons of queerness: capitalizing on the recent film portrayals and fame of Frida Kahlo, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Tito Vasconcelos, and Rojo. He screens sexually active women and men who joyfully demythify the charade of marriage, thus presenting a reiterated resistance to the fear of difference.

Finally, in “Collusions and Conclusions” I draw conclusions and point to areas for further research by reexamining these acts of adaptation-as-subversion and the ways in which subsequent film productions continue to engage in a dialogue about gender roles in Mexico. I have chosen these specific adaptations not only because of the importance of their authors and directors in a unique moment in time, but because they embody the dialogic (even genealogic) relationship between women writers, their adaptors, and their audience, and thus offer a multiplicity of performances: alternatives to a monolithic discourse of *mexicanidad*. In the pages that follow, I underscore the novel strategies of resistance to erasure, the subversive screenings, the palimpsestuous performance and deformation of gender roles, as well as highlight some of the inadvertent challenges faced when consciously, intentionally enacting feminist adaptation.