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STAGING STRATEGIES: DOLORES PRIDA'S AND  
CARMEN DUARTE'S CUBAN *DOPPELGÄNGERINNEN*

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**Staging Strategies: Dolores Prida's and Carmen Duarte's Cuban *Doppelgängerinnen***

**Synopsis:**

This work focuses on *Coser y cantar* (1981) by Dolores Prida (1943-2013) and *Carolina de Alto Songo* (1987) by Carmen Duarte (1959 - ) and the staging strategy of the gestic monologue employed by these Cuban playwrights to present two views through one actress embodying two characters. The plays denounce the discrimination faced by the protagonists in two different settings (NYC in the late 70s and Havana in the late 80s).

## **Staging Strategies: Dolores Prida's and Carmen Duarte's Cuban *Doppelgängerinnen***

When studying theater, critics must consider the ontological tensions inherent to the art form. On the one hand, the script, the written text, contains the list of the *dramatis personae*, the dialogue, and the didascalie. On the other hand, the performance, the actual staging of the script, unless recorded, is ephemeral and often adapted by a director to suit staging circumstances and relies on the audience present at that moment for its success. Already a delicate dramaturgical balance, what happens when political events upend playwrights' lives and thus their productions? Soon after 1959, the leaders of the Cuban Revolution seek to imbue cultural productions, especially theater, with a mission to educate and not to indulge in flights of dramatic fancy produced by one author, such as those of the theater of the absurd. Theatrical productions, endorsed by the Castro regime, had to be community-based and with serious didactic intent. Such disruptions affect the trajectory of the nation's dramatists, especially for those who leave the island. One must consider the age at which they leave and how far along they were in their careers when going into exile. For playwrights, once they leave the island, the stakes are high not just from a social or generational perspective, but also from cultural and linguistic ones. What strategies do they have in common to convey their messages?

Dolores Prida (1943-2013) leaves Cuba in 1961 with her family to eventually settle in New York City where she attends Hunter College and takes her first drama classes. She enters the publishing world, becomes a journalist, and starts to produce bilingual works from a Latina woman's perspective in a US urban setting. Carmen Duarte (1959 - ) stays back home until 1993. There, she attends the Instituto Superior de Arte de Cuba (ISA) from where she graduates in 1982 and establishes her theatrical group, Luminar, in 1989. She writes and stages her plays in Spanish, while her stance remains defiant as the economic crisis worsens in the 1980s and racial

and gender discriminatory practices on the island deepen. In spite of their generational and linguistic differences, their works share three staging strategies: the relative sparsity of the sets, which denounce social and economic conditions; the use of gestic monologues centered on their *Doppelgängerinnen*'s pivotal *hic et nunc* (here and now) that function as constant linguistic and geographic reminders of an *ibi et tum* (there and then); and the presence of humor, more specifically the Cuban *choteo*, that serves as the main conduit for the plays' critical stances and functions as a deflection mechanism of survival.<sup>1</sup>

### Sets and Didascalie

In *Coser y cantar: A One-Act Bilingual Fantasy for Two Women* (1981) by Prida, the set and the stage directions are extremely precise and establish the parameters for the gestic monologue and the humorous language central to this play:

A couch, a chair, and a dressing table with an imaginary mirror facing the audience is on each side of the stage. A low table with a telephone on it is upstage center. In the back, a low shelf or cabinet holds a recordplayer [sic], records, books. . . .

Stage right is ELLA's area. Stage left is SHE's. Piles of books, magazines and newspapers surround SHE's area. A pair of ice skates and a tennis racket are visible somewhere. Her dressing table has a glass with pens and pencils and various bottles of vitamin pills. SHE wears jogging shorts and sneakers.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Allatson, in *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies*, states that “choteo can at once mock or satirize agents and forms of dominant culture and take the form of a menacing countercolonial mimicry of those agents and forms. Choteo... becomes a key strategy for self-assertion, identity construction, and critique of dominant cultural protocols...” (67). In his study dedicated to Virgilio Piñera, Andrew Bennett explains that Piñera uses the *choteo* “como un modo de expresión marcadamente cubano cuya falta de seriedad funciona como un mecanismo de supervivencia frente a la inestabilidad sociopolítica” (49). Our two playwrights deploy this humoristic technique.

ELLA's area is somewhat untidy. Copies of *Cosmopolitan*, *Vanidades*, and *TV Guías* are seen around her bed. ELLA's table is crowded with cosmetics, a figurine of the Virgen de la Caridad and a candle. A large couch and a pair of maracas are visible. ELLA is dressed in a short red kimono. (49)

The set reflects how ELLA and SHE embrace conflicting and distinct aspects of their bilingual and bicultural personae within the confines of a New York City apartment. The items on ELLA's set reflect her Cuban roots (e.g., the Virgen de la Caridad is the patroness of Cuba). SHE's side of the room with skates, tennis racket, and vitamins confirms SHE is into health and exercise and the pens and pencils hint at studious pursuits. Later in the play, the outside world of a busy and noisy city outside the window comes to life repeatedly through strident sounds:

*“Loud gunshots are heard outside, then police sirens, screeches”* (54). Although different because, for the most part, ELLA embraces her Hispanic roots in Spanish and SHE uses English, they are both shaken by the violence and react in tandem nervously. Prida herself states in an interview that *“It's about two women who are really the same woman, the Latin woman and her alter ego, the American part of her. The idea is to be bilingual and bicultural”* (Umpierre 83).

The set in Duarte's *Carolina de Alto Songo* (1987) reflects the economic constraints of the era. The onus lies with the actor's ability to captivate the audience when delivering the monologues within such a minimalist set:

*Terminal de ómnibus de La Habana. En escena una hilera de asientos rojos. No aparece ninguna persona, pero por efectos sonoros creemos que hay un mar de gentes que caminan apresuradamente, y gritan y discuten. Se escuchan guaguas que vienen, paran como chirriando y abren puertas con ese sonido desinflado. . . . Todo está en*

*movimiento. Entra en escena Carolina, se sienta y pone su equipaje en el asiento de al lado. (33)*

Most of the ensuing stage directions serve to transition from Carolina to Josephine Baker, her *Doppelgängerin*. They establish the set's transformations through sounds that reflect Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century: “*El cua-cua-cua de los fotutos de automóvil, el transitar de las gentes que se oyen hablar en francés*” (34). Allusions to events and the enactment of certain labor laws later in the play help establish the present of the Cuban plot as in the mid-1980s. Surrounded by the activities and noises of busy urban settings, the characters in both plays find themselves on stage as they face their frustrations as women whose worth is underestimated by society. These sets prepare the audiences to focus on the playwrights' use of language and humor. In fact, for Prida, “Language is the third character” (Feliciano 114). Wilma Feliciano adds that “Plays with big sets and lots of characters cost too much to produce” (116).

### **Gestic Monologues and the *Doppelgängerinnen***

These relatively sparse settings work in tandem with the plays' central staging strategy, the gestic monologue. The *OED* defines “gestic” as “Of or pertaining to bodily movement, esp. dancing.” This economy of props invites audiences to focus on the characters' vital messages of denouncing the discriminatory practices in the US and Cuba. Staging *Doppelgängerinnen*—in Prida's case: ELLA/SHE (two actors playing two sides of the same woman); and in Duarte's: Carolina/Josephine Baker (one actor for two distinct characters)—provides yet another succinct and impactful way to denounce the prejudices the characters encounter because audiences are not distracted by the comings and goings of many actors on stage. For this study, we have adopted the concept of the *doppelgänger*, who appears in German folklore and refers to a “wraith or apparition of living person, as distinguished from a ghost” (“Doppelgänger”). Furthermore, we

have adapted the term, made it feminine, and reimagined these doubles as staged presences not to dramatize the death per se of a character, but as a means to reveal emotions and frustrations “buried” deep into the characters’ psyches and which cleverly surface or appear through a humorous catharsis intended to elicit reflections from the audience. Our playwrights subvert the elements of a classical tragedy by staging characters as tragicomical *Doppelgängerinnen* whose gestic monologues acknowledge the complexity of the experiences of exiled Cuban women (geographic or emotional) through critical, gendered, racial and/or ethnic lenses.

The playwrights’ choices guide the audience through a gamut of emotions ranging from anger, disappointment, frustration and end with defiant stances. As the plot in *Coser y Cantar* progresses, their adoption of the other’s language reveals that they are neither one nor the other, but two aspects of a Latina in the United States in the late seventies or early eighties. Israel Reyes explains that in this play, “the Spanish-speaking character of a bilingual duo compares the dirty glass partition at the Havana airport to the wall of a fish tank that separated families who wanted to touch each other one last time before departure” (134). Referencing a nostalgic line in the play points to an emblematic visual gesture that speaks volumes about the consequences of exile on a young exile’s psyche. Indeed, according to Mariela A. Gutiérrez, “el fenómeno del desdoblamiento de la personalidad . . . se exagera por medio del empleo del tema del exilio” (159). The *Doppelgängerinnen* in Prida’s play reflect the tension of having a body of two minds: one jogging her memories so as to not forget the past; the other, literally jogging in order to belong in the urban, dynamic city that never sleeps. In SHE’s case, her *hic et nunc* cannot move into a future space without embracing her *ibi et tum*, albeit at times begrudgingly.

Even though ELLA/SHE are the same person, the embodied realities on stage (Cuban + NYC cultures) clash, yet complement each other. At the beginning of the script Prida adds an important note from the author:

The piece is really one long monologue. The two women are one and are playing a verbal emotional game of ping pong. Throughout the action, except in the final confrontation, ELLA and SHE never look at each other, acting independently, pretending the other one does not really exist, although each continuously trespasses on each other's thoughts, feelings, and behavior.

This play must NEVER be performed in just one language. (49)

In essence, the one-act play is comprised of a series of gestic monologues, through which two sides of the same woman become undistinguishable, while their tensely executed *pas de deux* provides audiences with very distinct and recognizable *Doppelgängerinnen*. At first, it seems one would like to see the other disappear. For ELLA what is important is not to forget her Latin roots. For SHE, the objective is to become as “American” as quickly as possible. Once the lights go up, spectators see the split set. Moreover, the next set of didascalie provide audiences with what will become the characters' identifiable gestures, even before they utter a single word to each other, thus emphasizing bodily movements:

*In the dark we hear “Qué sabes tú”, a recording by Olga Guillot.<sup>2</sup> As lights go up slowly on ELLA's couch we see a naked leg up in the air, then a hand slides up the leg*

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<sup>2</sup> Olga Guillot (1922-2010) was a Cuban singer affectionately known as “la reina del bolero” who leaves Cuba in 1961. The bolero is a slow, romantic musical and dancing genre popular in Latin America. This *bolero* was penned by Myrta Silva, a Puerto Rican composer. More often performed by male singers, Prida's selection of Guillot's rendition highlights her intentionality of centering the attention on performing Latina women in exile. The opening stanza alludes to being ignorant about life and love and drifting as a ship through life without rhyme or reason:

*and begins to apply cream to it. ELLA puts cream on both legs, sensually, while singing along with the record. ELLA sits up in bed, takes a hairbrush, brushes her hair, then using the brush as a microphone continues to sing along. Carried away by the song, ELLA gets out of bed and “performs” in front of the imaginary mirror by her dressing table. At some point during the previous scene, lights go up slowly on the other couch. SHE is reading Psychology Today magazine. We don’t see her face at the beginning. As ELLA is doing her act by the mirror, SHE’s eyes are seen above the magazine. She stares ahead for a while. Then shows impatience. SHE gets up and turns off the recordplayer [sic], cutting off ELLA’s singing in mid-sentence. SHE begins to pick up newspapers and magazines from the floor and to stack them up neatly. (51)*

These opening gestures visually establish the tension between the two cultures as represented by the “popular” *bolero* versus the article in a “cultured,” highbrow magazine and the stereotypical laid-back attitude of ELLA in sharp contrast to the “must-be-doing-something useful” approach to life by SHE. Of gestic significance, audiences note that SHE “cuts” off ELLA in mid performance of the song. Will SHE be able to get rid of her persistent Spanish-speaking *Doppelgängerin* ELLA?

Significantly, the opening line of the song reappears in the closing lines of the monologue as ELLA, angrily grabs away the phone (as indicated by the stage directions) from SHE who is on the phone with their boyfriend trying to salvage the relationship, and screams at him in Spanish that “¡Tú no sabes nada de la vida!” (66). After slamming the phone down, both sit on

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Tú no sabes nada de la vida  
 Tú no sabes nada del amor  
 Eres como nave a la deriva  
 que vas por el mundo sin razón. (“Letra de Qué Sabes [sic] Tú [sic] de Olga Guillot”)

the floor back-to-back. ELLA fumes, and SHE is contrite. Finally, they are “touching” each other but with the backs to each other. At the end, they share thoughts that focus on the real tensions within the mind and spirit of a young, exiled Cuban woman in a large urban US city facing a hostile world (represented by the offstage boyfriend and sounds from the city) which does not seemingly know anything or care about ELLA’s/SHE’s internal/emotional identity struggles:

ELLA. Yo tengo mis recuerdos. Y mis plantas en la ventana. Yo tengo una solidez. Tengo unas raíces, algo de qué agarrarme. Pero tú . . . ¿tú de qué te agarras?

SHE. I hold on to you. I couldn’t exist without you.

ELLA. *But I wonder if I need you.* Me pregunto si te necesito ... robándome la mitad de mis pensamientos, de mi tiempo, de mi sentir, de mis palabras ... como una sanguijuela. (66; emphasis added)

Of note to this intense gestic *pas-de-deux*, is that ELLA has switched to English at a crucial moment of their monologue to realize and articulate that they are one and the same sucking blood/self like a leech once SHE reminds ELLA, that without SHE, ELLA would not make it in this new country. SHE too switches languages at a high point of the emotional gestic monologue:

SHE. But, if it weren’t for me you would not be the one you are now. **No serías la que eres.** I gave yourself back to you. If I had not opened some doors and some windows for you, you would still be sitting in the dark, with your **recuerdos**, the idealized beaches of your childhood, and your rice and beans and the rest of your goddam obsolete memories!

*(For the first time they face each other, furiously.)* (66; emphasis added)

The reality of an exiled Cuban woman demands a constant switching between two languages and two cultures, inevitably seen through a gendered prism. As their argument escalates, they are now facing each other, throwing not just words, but objects at each other: “*pillows, books, papers, etc.*” (67). The violent noises of “*sirens, shots, screams,*” coming off stage (from the street), bring their argument to an end, and they react in unison. They become frantic, run to the window, and for the first time, speak simultaneously, finally, they look at each other and embark in the joint effort of finding the “map” which has been mentioned from the onset of the play. They must act together as one to survive the pressures from outside. Searching for the map possibly symbolizes the quest for directions for navigating the *hic et nunc* while acknowledging having come from a Cuban *ibi et tum*. They must chart a different course as an exile in a more explicit response to the drifting boat of the *bolero* who like the *Doppelgängerinnen* should learn to understand present situations and learn to love each other’s aspect of their life in the US as an exile in order to stop drifting and accept their bicultural reality as Cuban exiles.

In Duarte’s play, a single actor plays Carolina and her admired African American-born French dancer and singer, Josephine Baker (1906-1975). Through her gestic monologues, Carolina reveals the realization of her lack of success as an Afro-Cuban dancer who after having left her native Alto Songo six years prior to coming to Havana to pursue her dream of becoming a famous star à la Josephine fails to achieve her goal. Duarte’s skillfully brings Josephine on stage through another set of gestic monologues delivered by a transformed Carolina. Through her monologues, Josephine denounces her experiences in the United States as an African American artist in the 20s and showcases her resolve to triumph. As a poor Afro Cuban dancer, Carolina could not possibly denounce her government’s racist policies without facing persecution or imprisonment. Carolina evokes Josephine when she “*saca de su maletín los plátanos [made out*

of papier-mâché] y se los coloca en la cintura” (37) as in the famous and defiant performance that cemented Josephine’s success in Paris in 1925 at the age of 19. Duarte belongs to the “generación de los ochenta,” which is a group of young artists fully aware that Cuban officials consider “el teatro como el medio efectivo que es para propagar ideas y que no tan sólo se impulsarían las obras que sirvieran tales propósitos de adoctrinamiento, sino las que no cumplieran esos fines se convertirían en amenazas para sus propios autores que podían identificarse de esta manera como enemigos de la revolución” (Sánchez-Grey Alba 147). As such, she opts to present to her audiences the dire reality of Cuba in the late 80s through the powerful monologic gesture of a successful African American *Dopplegängerin* of a previous generation and that is much admired by Castro for denouncing the US government’s racist laws. Josephine triumphs in the French capital not just because of her talents, but because when she alludes to France, it is to denounce her experiences as an African American artist discriminated against in the US. Carolina, in her native Cuba is not able to denounce the racism in her society so openly, but she can obliquely critique them through Josephine’s comments, who exclaims: “¡Cuánta libertad hay aquí!” (35). The gestic monologues allow Duarte to critique the Cuban regime indirectly. In effect and true to her name, Carolina is not just being courageous, but “calculating” as to when and how to denounce discriminatory practices without dire consequences.<sup>3</sup> She leaves Havana to return home to Alto Songo as a form of internal self-imposed exile.

Josephine’s statement helps show that the “cracks and uneasiness were more and more evident in Cuban society. Three decades of relative stability had not transpired without consequences. . . . Twenty years later, something gray was clearly installed in the Cuban society:

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<sup>3</sup> More on the origin of her name later in this work.

Sovietization, dogma, authoritarianism” (Muguercia 179). Through a distant, foreign *Dopplegängerin*, who comes alive on scene, the playwright can broach such politically charged topics. According to Magaly Muguercia,

the socialist body was set up; in this friction and disorder of diverse identities, in conflict and understanding, in tensions between diverse classes, races, ages, and sexes who, for the most part, shared the same project . . . which taught us what every good actor and dancer knows: that the organic performance, the one that produces real action (and is not necessarily realist), arises when the most difficult path is chosen; that profound coherence, which is truth in the act, touches chaos at one of its extremes. (176)

Bodies on stage “on the one hand [were] potent and cohesive, on the other divided, impaired, sometimes desperate and fragmented, subject to a profound conflict with itself” (180). The duplicity of Cuban policies resonates in Duarte’s play.

In this play, the gestic monologue does involve dancing: Carolina has come from her native Alto Songo to Havana to dance and make it big there. As the play opens, we see a disillusioned Afro-Cuban dancer recounting her trajectory. But it was not always that way. The title of the play functions as a road map to our reading because it adds a profound, symbolic depth to the denunciatory message. “Carolina,” of German origin, “proviene de Karl, y que significa ‘varón libre’. [Es] variante de Carla, del germánico mujer fría, dura y calculadora” (“Carolina”). The suffix “-ina,” according to the *Diccionario de la Real Academia Española*, can form nouns with two characteristics: “1. indica acción súbita y violenta y 3. Diminutivos” (“-ina”). “Carol-ina” represents both a violent and a diminished action. The “de” indicates origin or possession. “Alto Songo” which functions as a patronymic, emphasizes her place of origin and ties her to a very specific location. Josephine captures the essence of a calculating woman who

takes courageous steps against the racism in her native country and moves to Paris and makes a name for herself. Carolina starts off as a seemingly diminished character. However, emboldened by Josephine's fighting spirit, she takes bold actions against the censoring of her Afro Cuban dancing body as she denounces racism and ageism in her country.

As the play opens in that bus terminal in Havana, Carolina remembers her *ibi et tum* because it was there and then that as a younger self she sees Josephine Baker's photograph for the first time and feels the famous artist's presence in her.<sup>4</sup> Alto Songo, her place of birth and of her adolescent years, is the principal city of the municipality of Santiago de Cuba, a place of fierce descendants of fighters for the independence of Cuba in the nineteenth century. This place, purposely selected by Duarte, leads her audience to reflect on the historical, political, and racial importance of this town. Geographically distant from Havana, it is a significant location because according to Mariano Jimenez II y Mariano G. Jiménez, Alto Songo

fue fundada en 1858 por haber elegido dicho lugar como punto estratégico las columnas españolas del tiempo de la colonia. En 1879 sufrió la tiranía del general español Ayuso, quien mandó asesinar o deportar a muchos de los vecinos por sus ansias de independencia. Esta villa proporcionó a las filas del ejército cubano más del setenta por ciento de sus hombres hábiles para la guerra. (Jimenez y Jiménez)

It should be clarified that these "neighbors" were mostly there because it was a place of refuge—in the late nineteenth century for runaway slaves before emancipation and freed slaves afterwards. In the early twentieth century, it became refuge for the veterans of the war as well as for the victims of the war. In fact, outcasts of all social

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<sup>4</sup> According to Carolina, her aunt, who possess powers to understand the spiritual world, assures her that Josephine's spirit takes over or possesses Carolina on 12 April 1975 upon the star's death in Paris.

types over three generations had found opportunity in the southeast. The municipios were located largely within the impenetrable high country, within or near the foothills and valleys of the Sierra Maestra mountain range. (Pérez 519)

Even more relevant to understanding our protagonist is that, according to historian Louis A. Pérez, Jr., “The southeastern municipios were different in one other respect. In no other region of Cuba was the total percentage of the Afro-Cuban population as high” (519). Pérez adds that an estimated 80% of Alto Songo’s men joined the Liberation Army and comprised almost half of the invading force. José Marcelino Maceo y Grajales, who played an important role during the wars of independence (1868-1896) died fighting in Loma del Gato, Alto Songo. The Afro-Cuban ancestry of Carolina de Alto Songo is impeccable, if one understands the lineage from which her family comes. In the play, we also hear her allude to her mother and aunt with divinatory or spiritualistic powers, thus emphasizing a noble legacy of valor and Afro-Cuban spiritual fervor.

Her *Doppelgängerin* materializes when Carolina stands up and adopts a defiant and proactive posture as she puts on “*un abrigo gris con cuello de terciopelo y se lo coloca por encima de sus hombros. Carolina se convierte en Josephine Baker; la artista se recrea, alegre, mirando París por primera vez*” (34-35). She embodies Josephine Baker, who then breathes encouragement into Carolina. Two different characters, two distinct spaces, and two eras grouped in a single actor serve to convince the audience that these two experiences denounce the hypocrisy experienced by Afro-Cubans of the time vis-à-vis racial discrimination that the Castro regime insists does not exist.

The gestic monologues in both plays offer dramatically staged representations from a Cuban woman’s “double consciousness” perspective as articulated by W. E. B. Du Bois. For the characters in both plays, “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of

always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (568). In Prida's play, the characters exude a literally staged doubleness as a Latina person in the US. Judith Weiss argues that in Prida's play "this has to do with the ambiguity of Hispanic identity in the U.S. [sic] and with the ambivalence felt by the uprooted" (10). For Duarte, the title character is an othered body, that of an Afro-Cuban in her own country and more specifically in Havana. Hers is an internal exile from the capital back to the glorious provincial town from where she came and that merits to be remembered and immortalized.

In Prida's case, ELLA/SHE realize that together they are stronger in a violent society that discriminates against them. Duarte, aware of the censorship under the Castro regime, uses Josephine's words and gestures to denounce racist, gender, and ageist attitudes still present in Cuba almost thirty years after the Revolution. Carolina wants to return to her hometown to pursue her dancing passion and emulate Josephine. Both Prida and Duarte stage compelling *Doppelgängerinnen* to reveal the challenges of marginalized Cuban women on both sides of the political divide and across oceans.

The quest for a map is a significant part of the gestic monologue in Prida because the characters, amidst their heated discussions, look for it. In spite of the tensions, they keep looking for it. They never find it while on stage. That search is for the audience to pursue. For Duarte, the geographic and historical position of Alto Songo is crucial, but so are the chronicles on Josephine penned by Alejo Carpentier and acknowledged by the playwright in a preliminary note to the script: "(Las partes donde habla Josephine Baker fueron tomadas de *Crónicas* de Alejo Carpentier)" (33). According to Graciela Barbería, in those Chronicles of 1928-1938, "París emerge como un territorio socio cultural, artístico cosmopolita" and "la crónica emerge como

una cartografía que entrelaza la historia, las peculiaridades del lugar y los eventos con las actividades de sus habitantes.” For Carpentier, in a chronicle published in *Social*, vol. 16, no. 12 in December 1931, he captures the meeting of Baker with the creator of the song “El manisero”:

Basta charlar un instante con Josephine Baker, para comprender cuántas búsquedas, cuántos ensayos, cuántas horas de desaliento, suelen preparar la cristalización de uno de sus *números*... Y si, a veces, la brutalidad de sus contorsiones, la melancolía desgarradora de alguno de sus *blues*, son dominadas por una brusca ofensiva del instinto, ¡tanto mejor!... El instinto primitivo es fuente de una espontaneidad, de un frescor, de una gracia, que vamos olvidando cada vez más, a fuerza de frecuentar los invernaderos estéticos contruidos por el “buen gusto” de nuestros contemporáneos... Sólo una artista de color, del nuevo mundo, podía habernos traído esa violencia primaria que reclaman nuestros nervios... ¡Ojalá Josephine Baker firme un pacto duradero—léase: *contrato*— con el autor de nuestro *Manisero* [Simons] nacional! (236)

Carpentier hints at his own prejudices (e.g., “primitive instinct”) to praise Josephine Baker, yet in a post-revolutionary Cuba, Carolina who is also an artist of color, faces discrimination. Carolina does not want to disappoint her audience with political rhetoric. She does not want to depress herself or depress others. Thus, she deploys a different strategy: that of humor, as an alternative mean to deal with the humiliations she experiences. And it is through the *choteo* that her presence on stage manages to dispel censorship. Because from Duarte's perspective, what historians and intellectuals have overlooked, perhaps intentionally, is that

la problemática de la identidad nacional no radicaba en el enfrentamiento entre peninsulares y criollos, no se fundamentaba en la confrontación de los beneficios de la metrópoli frente a los intereses de los hacendados criollos, sino en algo mucho más

importante, esto es, en el tenso diálogo que ha existido entre las formas culturales españolas y las manifestaciones culturales de origen africano que tienen que convivir en un mismo espacio, con algunos ingredientes de otras culturas.

No obstante ese diálogo tenso, a lo largo de la historia ha intercambiado sus características hasta conformar, en el marco de esa tensión, una identidad que se define por la tensión, pero ya, también, por la asimilación, aun cuando la tensión permanece. Siempre hay un polo que expresa más lo africano y un polo que expresa más lo europeo, pero que se comunican entre ellos. Una unidad en *constante tensión*: en esa tensión interna la cultura cubana se constituye y enriquece. (Hidalgo 66)

For Hidalgo then “el choteo, por su parte, sigue siendo una válvula de escape para las vicisitudes y los problemas económicos que vive la sociedad cubana actual” (67). Duarte successfully stages two black women artists to demonstrate that Cuban politics and censorship treat them unequally. The desire to imitate Josephine Baker with the banana belt makes those for whom she auditions in Havana laugh at her. Carolina, a brave woman, considered a Cuban copy of “lesser category” of Josephine Baker, exposes the racism of her compatriots.

The two plays deal with the search for identity and a quest for direction: Who am I? Where do I belong in spaces that can be hostile to women because of their gender or race? Is there a map for this route/quest? Humor on stage serves to construct a road map.

### **Humor**

The gestic monologues and gestures are crucial, but in these plays, the *choteo* is a distinct characteristic. As Weiss points out, “ambiguity is itself a dominant theme of [Prida’s] plays” (10) and humor serves to underscore prejudices and stereotypes also in the form of a bilingual dueling *choteo*. In Prida’s play, stereotypes serve as springboards for humoristic touches. For example

the foods and quantities they opt to eat (ELLA: scrambled eggs, toast, white cheese, café con leche; SHE; a glass of orange juice) and the activities for the day (SHE sets a vigorous agenda in English and ELLA repeats it in Spanish until she veers and goes back to food and wishing to consult the cowry shells with her *madrina santera*):

ELLA. *(Has finished eating, picks up tray, gets enthusiastic about the planning.)*

Escribir una carta al editor del *New York Times*.

SHE. That too. *(Adds it to the list.)* How about peace in the Middle East?

ELLA. La cuestión del aborto.

SHE. Should that come after or before the budget cuts?

ELLA. *(With relish.)* Comprar chorizos mexicanos para unos burritos.

SHE. *(Writing.)* See that new Fassbinder film. *(ELLA makes a “boring” face.)*

Find the map ... *(SHE writes.)*

ELLA. *(Serious.)* Ver a mi madrina. Tengo algo que preguntarle [sic] a los caracoles. *(Splashes Florida Water around her head.)* (52)

Although revealing two distinct aspects of the Cuban exile woman, they do not seem to listen to the other. Each one ruminates a thought that may or may not connect with the other's statement. In spite of the dichotomy, humor bridges the fissure, and audiences are listening to the “two sides of the cultural divide” (González 442). In fact, “audiences can see and hear their own stories in a language that reflects their experiences and cultural imaginaries” (Reyes 134).

Humorous moments in Prida's play include mixed metaphors or sayings that elicit corrections from ELLA or SHE depending on the language:

ELLA. [sic] Es como tener un ...pingüino colgado del cuello!

SHE. An albatross...you mean like an albatross around your neck. Okay,  
Okay... I'll make myself light, light as feather... light as an albatross  
feather. I promise. (54-55)

SHE's correction comes rapidly, but just as quickly she also softens the reply and modifies the figure of the albatross to a smaller metonymic image: one of its feathers. The humor is evident but so is her empathetic turn of phrase. SHE wishes to philosophize and proposes that they talk about the meaning of life to which ELLA promptly responds with a proverb alluding to traditional roles for women which gives the play its title:

ELLA. Mi mamá me dijo una vez que la vida, sobre todo la vida de una mujer, era  
coser y cantar. Y yo me lo creí. Pero ahora me doy cuenta que la vida, la  
de todo el mundo: hombre, mujer, perro, gato, jicotea, es, en realidad,  
comer y cagar . . . ¡en otras palabras, la misma mierda! (57)

ELLA continues to subvert the language and in this case a proverb clearly connected to Catholic and Hispanic societal values. Philosophically, she expands it to include all sentient creatures thus questioning established hierarchies among different beings that then justify discrimination and abuse of those considered inferior. At one point, and given the fast pace of the exchange, SHE too code switches providing comic relief: "Yes, one day soon I have to get my caca together and get out THERE and DO something" (60). SHE echoes ELLA's philosophy of life with her own twist; while ELLA has been incorporating lines from popular songs or poems in Spanish.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example, ELLA, who is not supposed to be the intellectual one, quotes lines from "Pentacromía" a poem by Julia de Burgos (1914-1953), the rebellious biracial and outspoken feminist *avant la lettre* Puerto Rican poet who dies alone in NYC. She specifically quotes the verses that expresses her desire to be a man because of the double standard that favors men: "Hoy quiero ser hombre... ser todo un Don Juan; raptar a Sor Carmen y a Sor Josefina, rendirlas, y a Julia de Burgos violar . . ." (59).

For her part, Duarte avoids a stereotypical dramatic staging in which a “white” and a “black” person are juxtaposed on stage where one ignores the other to provoke a burlesque and racist laugh. Duarte projects that harmful laughter off-stage and through Carolina’s account of the laughter of the theater director and the applicants for positions in the dance corps. Carolina remembers the incident this way: “Yo tenía unos plátanos de papel maché amarrados con un cordel y me los puse en la cintura; nunca se han reído tanto de mí. Envidia de las otras, a ninguna se le había ocurrido ser como Josephine Baker . . . Nunca he podido entender por qué no se puede ser como Josephine Baker” (36). Carolina recalls that particular day as the happiest one in her life because she danced as if she were Josephine Baker.

During her second stage transformation, Carolina puts the bananas around her waist. The sounds of European music atmosphere are heard again. Josephine enters the scene laughing in total contrast to Carolina’s somber tone. The next stage direction indicates that a screen appears on stage with a documentary of a performance by Josephine Baker. At the end, we see Carolina sitting down lamenting her fate and admitting her defeat as a woman, as an artist, as a person of color. She even goes so far as to point out that her aunt did not interpret her fate well. She does not know how to cook like Josephine. She gets angry with herself because she is depressing herself. As she tries to articulate more clearly why she is depressed now, a voice announces that the bus bound for Alto Songo is ready to board (the modern *deus ex machina*). At this climactic moment of the play Carolina realizes that when she returns home, she will be able to do shows, her audience will applaud her and acclaim her by her stage name of those years: La Platanitos, thus “Cubanizing” Baker’s trademark and making it her own. Her stage name is a diminutive, but it also indicates that she is still young despite the fact that for the Havana dance corps she is considered an old woman. It is a bittersweet moment for the spectators, as Carolina takes her

suitcase, stands up, adopts Josephine Baker's posture, as the play concludes with her frozen in that gesture of departing (38). Once home, will she be able to truly affirm her identity as a black Cuban woman from Alto Songo? Retuning to her hometown marks her realization that she can inspire future generations as a dance teacher of many more children "than Josephine Baker's eleven adopted children" (38) since she returns, figuratively speaking, with six years of experience under her "banana" belt.

Dolores Prida's and Carmen Duarte's plays maintain a vivacious tempo because of their creative staging of *Doppelgängerinnen* who deliver their lines through gestic monologues on sparse sets marked by the *choteo*. Audiences are captivated by the code switching in Prida's play and the transformation of an Afro-Cuban woman into Josephine Baker in Duarte's. The humor envelops the plays and allows criticism of discrimination to be more palatable and acceptable. The playwrights denounce prejudices against women in the US and in Cuba because of their ethnicity or their race. As the plays come to an end, the *Doppelgängerinnen*, literally and through their gestures on stage, seek a direction for their future. ELLA/SHE in unison ask for the whereabouts of the map. Carolina grabs her suitcase, starts to walk towards the bus, and remains in place on her way there as the lights go out.

Their final gestures on stage encourage audiences to ponder the options for these *Doppelgängerinnen* and imagine and create endings to the stories. Will they find their map/bus? Will they succeed in asserting their identities as exiled Cuban women in spite of the challenges?

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