

Staging a Counterrevolution: Vicente Leñero's *Todos somos Marcos* (1996) and Roberto Parra's *La Negra Ester* (1989)

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Material and symbolic scenarios embody the tensions, hopes, and contradictions of an interconnected world. In the early twentieth century, Latin America's erudite left fluidly navigated geopolitical processes in dialogue with the United States, China, and the Soviet Union. Intellectuals and political activists, including Mariátegui and Flores-Magón, had promoted, produced, and anticipated alternate modes of sociability. Following the 1970s, the political left was challenged with a neoliberal socioeconomic paradigm. Within the neoliberal environment, consumerism systematized emerging sociopolitical values and grassroots trends eroded the left's traditional role as representatives of the people. The playing field of politics was altered and many intellectuals were unable or unwilling to adapt to the democratization of culture. The left lost the theoretical plasticity of former years, and, as Francis Fukuyama observed, the 1988 fall of the Berlin Wall marked the end of the Cold War's oppositional politics (Fukuyama 4).

Socioeconomic transitions prescribe modes of being that inherit social practices and propose future values. This article focuses on Chile's Roberto Parra's *La Negra Ester* (1989) and Mexico's Vicente Leñero's *Todos somos Marcos* (1996). Destined for mass consumption, these theatrical productions interweave drama and politics to market alternate forms of sociability in the midst of a neoliberal conversion. In 1988,

Chile transitioned from neoliberal dictatorship to democracy. In 1994, NAFTA's neoliberal restructuring shocked Mexico's economy. At the intersection of virtual and industrial identities, these works linked global, national, and local processes. Roberto Parra's (1921-1995) *La Negra Ester* was the most viewed cultural production during Chile's transition to democracy, and Vicente Leñero (1933-2014) was a key figure in Mexico's progressive scene. This article opens with *Todos somos Marcos'* conventional framing of Latin America's left, and then proposes alternate forms of sociability in *La Negra Ester*. It argues that these plays, staged in the midst of a neoliberal conversion, reflected a societal desire to overcome a structure of conflict that had dominated twentieth-century politics, modified the affective expression of bodies once repressed, and contested paternalistic conceptions of intellectual elites.

Global networks shape the production, circulation, and reception of local cultural commodities. The interdependence of cultural and socio-economic dimensions is a given in a neoliberal marketplace, and, as Carlos Monsiváis suggests, “cambios de la economía repercuten en la moral social y los cambios de la moral social en la economía” (Monsiváis 717). David Harvey indicates that following WWII, a reconfigured world order had sought to regulate “state, market, and democratic institutions to guarantee peace inclusion, well-being, and stability” (Harvey 10). Governments deployed a fiscal and monetary policy, dubbed Keynesian, to ensure employment, dampen business cycles, and avoid the radicalized political environment that preceded WWII. However, the state-regulated economy stagnated by the 1970s. Alessandro Fornazzari notes that neoliberalism emerged to reconfigure the “relation between the state and the economy, where the market becomes the organizing and regulative principle” (Fornazzari 89). Neoliberalism is permeable, and, in Wendy Brown's nomenclature, it fluctuates “as economic policy, a modality of government, and an order of reason, it is at once a global phenomenon, yet inconstant, differentiated, unsystematic, impure” (Brown 20). Having displaced regulatory control to the markets, detractors of neoliberalism observed an intensification of socioeconomic inequality, an unethical commercialization of resources, an interdependence of state and corporate interests, and an amplified influence and instability of financial capital (28-9).

Cultural Industries: Reprocessing Revolutionary Images

Cultural industries recycle and restructure sociocultural practices. Professional writers, journalists, and intellectuals, including the famed Boom generation, had deliberated the intersection of aesthetics and consumerism (Draper 417). Mediated by

popular demand, global, national, and local co-productions frame politics, newsreels, literature, and film. Vicente Leñero's *Todos somos Marcos* (1996) reflects on the remains of Mexico's left shortly after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Multitudes protested the neoliberal reforms, and the gatherings, "especially that of February 11, 1995 represented an explosive disturbance" (Day 111). A neo-Zapatista movement, led by Subcomandante Marcos in 1994, attempted to counteract the disastrous influence that NAFTA had on disenfranchised communities in southern Mexico. Set in Mexico City, Leñero's protagonists generate a microcosm of the internal tensions permeating the left. Carlos Monsiváis suggests that the "political left was 'left' only in name, because it has not learned how to compensate, with new projects, the disappearance of the socialist ideal" (Monsiváis "Falta mucho para que nada ocurra", quoted in Day 102).

Todos somos Marcos opens with Zapatista imagery. In the first scene, a masked intruder looks around an apartment and stabs the protagonist. Raúl, however, is merely dreaming that his ex-girlfriend, Laura, is the aggressor. As he wakes up, his best friend Miguel arrives and they talk about the neoliberal environment, the dilapidated apartment, and Laura. Raúl evokes their breakup, three months prior, and blames the Zapatistas. Miguel is seemingly more interested in seducing Laura, and the latter comes into being as a projection of their conversation. Both Laura and Raúl are inclined towards the political left, but have contrasting reactions to the Zapatista uprising in southern Mexico. Laura is eager to take the leap of faith from theory to practice. Returning from a mass gathering, she accuses Raúl of ideological duplicity. His aesthetics of everyday life, inhabiting bourgeois privilege while proclaiming progressive values, collides with her newborn revolutionary consciousness.

Interweaving a nostalgic rendering of the political left with a pragmatic reading of current historical processes, *Todos somos Marcos* stages a "battle of opposing scripts" (Day 103). These scripts fluctuate according to socioeconomic environments, and the couple's failing relationship becomes a microcosm for competing narratives within the left. Laura aspires to counter the neoliberal onslaught and regenerate a political platform in the name of an undefined collective utopia, perhaps rejecting capitalist individualism in favor of social unity. Assigning meaning to her longing for revolution, in symbolic or ideological dimensions, would denote a rite of passage from rhetoric to action. Raúl, however, poignantly reasons: "Mira lo que pasó en Nicaragua, con la misma Cuba, Laurita. El mito de la revolución armada ya pasó a la historia; es puro socialismo trasnochado" (Leñero 78). Avoiding a nostalgic reenactment of a revolutionary utopia,

we “may see Laura’s actions as a repetition of outdated 1960s political action—or even political tourism—that has remained stagnant in the face of dramatic political changes,” as Stuart Day notes (Day 108).

In Mexico’s foundational 1920s, generating alternate subjectivities or redefining traditional archetypes was essential to post-revolutionary politics. General Francisco Villa, for instance, came to personify an “enigma,” according to Horacio Legrás (435). Leñero redeploys this conceptualization of politics as enigma. For instance, the play’s script opens by quoting Subcomandante Marcos’ 1994 interview: “Si desaparece Marcos con pasamontañas, cualquiera de nosotros se pone un pasamontañas y ése es Marcos” (Leñero 63). The image of everyman, as collective consciousness, permeates this gesture. It is a marketing strategy by which the consumer may project dreams and aspirations onto a blank slate. The problem is how to deploy revolutionary images to instigate a specific social transformation. In dialogue with Laura, Raúl accurately notes that Marcos is merely an image, a “mito cinematográfico. Como Richard Gere, como Harrison Ford, como Robert de Niro” (74).

In this neoliberal landscape, the characters recycle images of revolution, and, as Stuart Day suggests, “if 1988 represents the fraud-ridden, unjust loss of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas and the political left, the 2000 election represents the failure of the left to respond to the challenge of neoliberal ideology” (Day 102). *Todos somos Marcos* evokes an enduring ambivalence of intellectuals and the state. Ignacio Sánchez-Prado indicates that in the 1920s, activists and scholars wavered between “una aspiración constante a definir una cultura nacional ‘oficial’ y a adquirir para la literatura y el arte el derecho a definir los parámetros de la mexicanidad; por otro, parte de la legitimidad adquirida por el campo proviene de su capacidad de criticar al estado” (Sánchez-Prado 197). Intellectuals oscillated between defining the national stage and criticizing the state that embodied these parameters. This interaction emerged during an “atomización ideológica y estética que resultó precisamente la incapacidad de los intelectuales del campo literario de articularse eficientemente al proyecto del Estado” (197). The ambivalent relationship of intellectuals and the state, as producers of national cultures and critics of the establishment, had mediated the inherent contradictions of capitalist development. *Todos somos Marcos* recycles this ambivalent relationship, critiquing its atomized neoliberal environment while staging a spectacle for metropolitan consumers. The characters’ critique of neoliberalism does not propose a viable alternate path, other than invoking an image of revolution. Leñero’s opposing scripts, embodied in Raúl and

Laura, redeploy the 1920s revolutionary enigma and nostalgically conjure the oppositional politics that defined Mexico's left.

The democratization of culture in the neoliberal paradigm displaced the regulators of the aesthetic. In Debra Castillo's nomenclature, Laura's iconic recycling of revolutionary militancy admits "the production of the cultural subject, but this iterability, like that of the Zapatista name itself, serves in Mexican society more as a ritualized form of production than a concrete social praxis" (Castillo 67). *Todos somos Marvos* produces a cultural critique without offering a viable alternative, and bares the neoliberal paradigm and the Zapatista conflict without filling the void it condemns. The play intellectually stimulates urban audiences, while it redeploys recycled revolutionary imagery. Its enactment of politics mimics contemporary web-based news aggregators, in which multiple perspectives simulate a fair and balanced dialogue.

Staging Alternate Social Bodies

In 1988, Chile began its transition from neoliberal dictatorship to democracy. Inherited epistemologies embedded in political, artistic, and technocratic discourses shaped the path from right-wing authoritarianism to representative government. Wendy Brown points out that neoliberalism had originated as "an 'experiment' imposed on Chile by Augusto Pinochet and the Chilean economists known as the 'Chicago Boys' after the 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende" (Brown 20). Governments starved for credit, ensuing a wave of financial instability, had to implement structural neoliberal reforms to receive financial assistance. In time, Reagan, Thatcher, and the International Monetary Fund helped disseminated the model across the globe. With both positive and nefarious effects, according to John Beasley-Murray, the neoliberal paradigm "helped to open new forms of socialization" (Beasley Murray 39). These alternate social scripts oscillated in time and place, and, according to Diana Taylor, the "performance and the aesthetics of everyday life vary from community to community, reflecting historical and cultural specificity as much in the enactment as in the viewing/reception" (Taylor 3). The intersections of culture, consumer preferences, and state policy shaped alternate social scripts, expressed as sets of possibilities, which produced Chile's emerging social body.

La Negra Ester was the most viewed cultural production in Chile's transition to democracy. Its commercial success occurred in the midst of significant social polarization and potentially had the largest audience in Chile's theatrical history (*El Mercurio*, August 16, 1992). The play was the first collaboration of director Andrés

Pérez, poet and musician Roberto Parra, and four acting troupes that collectively founded *El Gran Circo Teatro*. The collective recovered neglected spaces for social interaction, including streets, plazas, the central Santa Lucía park, and the Esmeralda and Caupolicán popular theaters. *El Gran Circo Teatro* circumvented censorship to imagine a future beyond dictatorship, and *La Negra Ester* countered the dictatorship's "monochromatic" fear with a festival of colors and sounds. The play portrayed unrepresented social groups that lived in poverty, such as sailors, pimps, prostitutes, and artists. It staged unimagined forms of socialization for those who grew up in a repressive society. Director Andrés Pérez noted, shortly after establishing *El Gran Circo Teatro*, that "[e]l eje de nuestro trabajo es lo popular" (28).

Recognized intellectuals at the time were ambivalent about the production's value, however. Ramón Griffero's *El teatro chileno al fin del siglo* overlooked the play, and Juan Villegas sharply criticized the troupe for depicting an "estereotipación folklórica o populista" (2001, 143). The latter argued, adopting Boal's nomenclature, that *La Negra Ester* emphasized entertainment, was anti-popular, and thus deprived of revolutionary conscience. Inheriting a socially conservative worldview, Villegas assumed furthermore that, "esos espacios de diversión—el prostíbulo y el bar—se asociaban con la degradación de la voluntad revolucionaria o con las actividades degradadoras" (143). For men and women frozen in the oppositional politics of dictatorship, the play voiced an unbearable lightness. *La Negra Ester's* musical melodrama, Villegas argues, "ha silenciado la lectura de la historia nacional como conflicto" (148).

Chile's popular audiences, however, flocked to streets and theaters to view the spectacle. The representatives of the popular had to compete with the popularity of the play, and dramatist Antonio de la Parra, "called *La Negra Ester* a dividing point for Chilean theater—marking of a distinct 'before and after' ... a movement away from strictly political themes to what he termed 'post-Pinochetism'" (quoted in Davy 108). The play's spectacular success provides a framework from which to reflect upon cultural emancipation borne out of a society in the midst of social polarization. Beatriz Rizk points out that the historical process opened with the 1973 murder of an elected socialist president, progressed to a right-wing neoliberal dictatorship, and culminated in the eventual return to representative government (Rizk 2010, 173). The return to democracy, observes Fornazzari, provided "a unique insight into the culture, problems, and logics of the transition to neoliberal capitalism" (1). The play negotiated the intersection of aesthetics and politics to produce alternate forms of sociability during the transition to neoliberal democracy. Its success embodied a societal desire to

overcome a structure of conflict dominating politics, modified the affective expression of bodies once repressed, and contested paternalistic precepts of intellectual elites.

A Global Coproduction: La Negra Ester

The play is set in the late 1930s, in the seaport of San Antonio. It is four-act melodrama adapted from Roberto Parra's octosyllabic poem *La Negra Ester* and depicts the misadventures of penniless troubadour Roberto and prostitute Ester. Roberto seduces, then abandons her, and guilt-stricken, he apologizes and they briefly reunite. The cycle repeats itself, and Ester loses her patience with the penniless singer. Heartbroken, Roberto arranges her marriage with the wealthy widower Barahona. The festive ending counterpoints fetishized love with economic safety, themes that resonated with Chile's neoliberal environment.

Roberto Parra (1921-1995) was raised in southern Chile. The Parra family was associated with the political left, so it had to tread carefully so as not to follow the fate of murdered artists like Victor Jara. In life, Roberto Parra was mostly unknown and worked at provincial brothels, plazas, and ports. In 1957, he traveled to San Antonio to work at the cabaret Luces del Puerto. Following the theatrical adaptation of *La Negra Ester*, he became a national figure. His siblings Violeta Parra (1917-1967) and Nicanor Parra (1914-2018) were already celebrated artists, and *La Negra Ester* briefly introduces both in the third act.

Theatre director Andrés Pérez (1951-2003) was also from southern Chile, born in Punta Arenas. Pérez was vital to Chile's reformulation of gender conventions and his birthday has been celebrated as Chile's National Theatre Day since 2006 (*La Nación*, May 7, 2007). He graduated from the University of Chile, danced at Sábados Gigantes, worked at Teatro Itinerante, and helped establish Teatro Urbano Contemporáneo. In 1982, he traveled to France and joined the famed *Théâtre du Soleil*. He performed in multiple collaborations and experimented with circus, pantomime, and mask techniques. Led by Arianne Mnouchkine, the *Théâtre du Soleil* explored Asian and European drama with an emphasis on clowning and street theatre. Thomas Donahue notes that the troupe made "an emphasis on physical expression rather than spoken language; the use of masks, clowning and fairground entertainment methods; reliance upon the tradition of the commedia dell'arte for the development of characters" (Donahue 35).

In 1964, *Théâtre du Soleil* was created "as a worker's cooperative. Actors, musicians, scene designers, and director were paid the same salary. Distinctions among

workers were effaced. The names of those participating in the production were listed in alphabetical order on programs” (34). The troupe critiqued contemporary culture while producing spectacles accessible to mainstream audiences. Andrés Pérez returned to Chile in 1988 and, with the support of four local troupes, founded *El Gran Circo Teatro*. They adapted Parra’s poem *La Negra Ester* with gameplay, improvisation, and collaborative workshops. The absence of hierarchy spurred a creative environment that contrasted with Chile’s repressive society. Mixing street theater, clowning and acrobatics, live music was integral to the spectacle. An orchestra moved on and off stage, and played syncopated melodies and rhythms ranging from local cueca to transnational genres such as boleros, waltzes, and tangos. The offbeat mixture of street sounds and musical theatre was comic, poetic, and dreamlike. The music broke the fourth wall, and theatre critic Kate Davy remarks that: “like Mnouchkine’s ever present musicians, a group of three multi-instrumental performers accompanies the action, sometimes with a score that underlines it, sometimes moving onto the playing portion of the stage to participate directly, and sometimes providing vocal backup for full-company numbers” (108).

In the United States, audiences witnessed “a postmodern blend of European and indigenous styles with a noticeable presence of Orientalism—referencing both Mnouchkine and Edward Said” (108). The performers’ acrobatic routines, “incorporated mime, dance, and circus techniques—all aspects of street theatre’s direct address, physicalization, and high energy performance style” (108). Vibrantly colored eyes complemented white face make-up, costumes included Indian and Japanese designs—for both female and cross-dressed prostitutes—and regional garbs for brothel customers. The troupe executed, “a blocking and playing style that used the straight-line horizontal groupings of some Asian performances” (108). The playful transgressions commenced with the opening soliloquy. Roberto, masterfully portrayed by Boris Quercia (1967-), spoke to the audience directly:

Conocí a la negra Ester
 aquí en casa e’Oña Berta
 esta casa llena de puertah
 me hizo conocer el querer
 corazón sin enloquecer.
 Un día por la mañana
 anteh que rayara el sol
 máh linda que un arrebol
 fresquita como manzana
 muy alegre muy ufana
 venía la Negra Ester. (Parra 129)

The words generate a doubling of timelines: the first is established by the dialogical interaction of characters and audience presently reflecting on past events, while the second focuses on reenacting a 1930s romantic comedy. The characters share sentiment, self-conscious criticism, nostalgic remembrance, and incited audience participation. *La Negra Ester's* kaleidoscope of musical genres, costumes, dance, and illumination had a narcotic effect in the midst of the repressive monotony experienced during the dictatorship.

Inherited Scripts

The brothel is a recurring trope in Latin America, and, as Rodrigo Cánovas notes, it is “an enigmatic stage, as if an oracle, where one can reflect on existential fundamentals” (Cánovas 13). Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, José Donoso, and José María Arguedas deploy the liminal space as a societal microcosm shared by all social classes. At the time of *La Negra Ester*, the audience juxtaposed Catholicism with military censorship, and from this liminal environment one could imagine alternate corporeal conventions.

Chile's institutionalized theater originated in 1941-43, with the Teatro Experimental de la Universidad de Chile and the Teatro Ensayo de la Universidad Católica (Rojo 524). By the late 1960s, over three hundred independent theatre troupes, influenced by Latin American and European avant-gardes, populated the cultural scene. Cultural sponsorship was integral to president Salvador Allende's Unidad Popular (1970-73). Local intellectuals and academics feared consumer preferences, however. Grínor Rojo points out that they supervised the first television stations to protect people from “merchants more worried about the profitability of their business than the cultural welfare of the nation” (525). Beasley Murray suggests that by the 1970s, the social pressures that destabilized Allende's Unidad Popular had begun “to constitute themselves with autonomy from the State” (36). Authorities struggled to accommodate demands from marginalized populations, and, following the 1973 military *coup d'état*, the government enforced “social changes sought since the Christian Democrat presidency of Frei, although it reversed the political value of these changes” (36). Nelly Richard observes that the events exposed multiple fractures and ruptures that reoriented local history and the rationality that nurtured the nation, as the dictatorship undermined Chile's democratic institutions (2003, 287).

Michael Lazzara proposes that the axioms that permeated Chile's 1988 return to democracy materialized “in a landscape where the new constantly replaces the old

and where forgetting the past seems much easier than doing the painful work of memory” (32). At stake were the mediatized role of artistic production and the ethical duties of intellectuals floating in the midst of the neoliberal storm. In reference to Chile’s neoliberal economy, Idelber Avelar suggests that: “the market operates according to a substitutive, metaphorical logic in which the past must be relegated to obsolescence. The past is to be forgotten because the market demands that the new replace the old without leaving a remainder” (2). Many opposition intellectuals concurred with this perspective, and swiftly associated living within the market with the dictatorship. The authority previously bestowed upon authors and artists, enshrined in academic and state institutions, was destabilized by the neoliberal socioeconomic paradigm.

Consumerism, fostered by the dictatorship, was deployed to attack the authority of Chile’s intellectuals. Echoing 1920s anti-imperialist slogans, there was an eminently valid perception that global cultural commodities degraded national or revolutionary consciousness. Héctor Noguera indicates that the dictatorship purposely defunded and taxed local cultural productions not intended for educational purposes, as outlined by the military (87-9). Stripping intellectuals of state subsidies, thus leaving them at the mercy of consumer preferences, was one of several tactics deployed by the dictatorship to silence any opposition. The process linked censorship, memory, and consumerism: “tensión que rodea la pérdida se inscribe, a su vez, en un presente social dividido [entre] la recordación fija del pasado [y] la completa disipación de las huellas...en sintáctica complicidad con la globalización capitalista” (Richard 2003, 288).

The intersection of censorship and capitalism, commodification and historical amnesia, produced a misreading of the markets. The recycling of vintage fashion, movies, revolutionary images, and artistic genres are examples of the reproduction of past commodities demanded by present markets. Cultural producers wish to capture collective sentiments and desires, not erase them. As was previously mentioned, neoliberalism is permeable and impure, and to equate capitalism with amnesia is an error. Markets, artists, and consumers recover the past to restage present and future commodities. Bringing together neoliberalism and government repression in one neat package possibly originated in a desire to fulfill a politics of conflict. Both the militant right and left longed for neatly defined antagonists.

The misreading of commodification, the substitutive-metaphorical logic of the market, took place in terms of an erasure of the past that linked neoliberalism with government atrocities. Henceforth, blockbuster cultural productions could be

condemned for their success in the marketplace. This interrelation conditioned Villegas' aforementioned appraisal of *La Negra Ester*: “ha silenciado la lectura de la historia nacional como conflicto” (148). The play, on the contrary, interweaved global and local cultures to modify the affective expression of bodies once repressed. Omitting the structure of conflict dominating Chile's politics, the spectacle paved the way for cultural productions mediated by the global market while contesting the paternalistic precepts of an intellectual elite. The play's transformative potential was embodied in the flow of bodies, audiences, and music that counteracted the fear experienced during the dictatorship.

Cultural Emancipation: Corporeal Scripts

Cultural industries shape the production, distribution, and reception of national imaginings. Contemporary artists coproduce identities that fluidly interact with market forces, as García Canclini argues: “identidad es teatro y política, es actuación y acción” (770). Bestseller commodities, such as *La Negra Ester*, shape the realms of established cultural discourses. Contemporary popular cultures emerge at a nexus between idealization and irony—pastiche in Jameson's nomenclature. Shaping these sets of possibilities, which define how we live within the community, is critical for an evolving social order. Enrique Dussel observes that as subjects, we are immersed in “intersubjective *networks*—that is, in multiple functional relationships in which they [subjects] play the position of irreplaceable, living, material *nodes*” (5). Cultural industries appropriate marginalized traditions and practices to at times deploy alternate paths and possibilities mediated by popular consumption.

The crossroads of aesthetics and politics, as living material nodes, is constrained by inherited scripts. These social conventions embody a variety of cultural systems. Diana Taylor proposes that their performance, either on stage or in our daily lives, generates “a methodological lens” (Taylor 3). Actors and audiences share a horizon of experience materialized amid multilayered cultures, and alternate corporeal scripts may authorize or relegate competing social practices not categorized within a given cultural field. Proposing a theatrical history, for instance, implies a quest to confirm or transform a nation's heritage (Villegas 2005, 27). The initial omission of *La Negra Ester* in Chile's national canon exemplifies this phenomenon, as southerners Roberto Parra and Andrés Pérez did not belong to the ranks of the capital's underground resistance troupes, nor did they work for television or film industries.

Finding a language to articulate Chile's social body was integral to the transition to democracy. Audiences are social actors, whether in the traditional playhouse, public plazas, or on the city streets. They participate in discursive events and incorporate a variety of social and cultural systems. These are imbedded in complex structures of authority regulated by institutional relations, and, as Stuart Hall notes, interactions at the point of production will fit codes of reception without over-determining the chain of communication (Hall 93-4). The process embodies aesthetic systems and social functions that bridge the gap between artistic events and the places where they come into being. In practice, academic and vernacular languages take on a dialogical relationship that is framed by a "changing horizon of experience," argues Jauss (73). Highly successful cultural commodities, such as *La Negra Ester*, shape and express the horizon of experience in a given society, which varies according to the production, distribution, and reception of discourses. Contemporary culture industries, reproduced digitally or mechanically, permeate our "cultura popular, la perfecta mezcla de lo real y lo industrial" (Monsiváis 731). Theatrical discourses emerge at the crossroads of aesthetics and social practices.

Signifying an alternate culture requires negotiating with inherited social scripts to propose future interactions. Hernán Vidal notes that the manner in which bodies navigate an environment articulates behaviors that, in reference to Boal, may disrupt "mechanical movement scripts [assigned] to a social class" (150). Social bodies drive consumer sentiments, and "it is not a rational consciousness, with data systematized sociologically or statistically, but it is a vital consciousness" that leads "to a modification of attitudes. Thus, it is a critical consciousness" (175). These social and theatrical scenarios, argues Taylor, "exist as culturally specific imaginaries—sets of possibilities" which may subvert a given "*mechanics* of spectacle" (13). In the midst of Chile's authoritarian repression, modifying corporeal scripts had a transformative potential. It implied "the capacity to act in solidarity or antagonistically with the behavior of other human beings" (Vidal 151). These corporeal scripts intersected reconfigured collective memories. Richard suggests that the process reformulated "its value from the present: open to urgencies and challenges here-now whose composition of utterances redistributes past signifiers in accordance to new projects" (Richard 2001, 15). Redefining corporeal scripts, Vidal proposes, transmits an "exaltation of the sacredness of the body as the foundation for a more desirable culture and civilization" (174).

Memory's mutability reprocesses alternate social practices, and the dialogic relationship among words and the place of their inception, bodies and the places they

inhabit produces the conditions for staging social transformation. Dislocating theatrical conventions, in most contexts, modestly introduces a discursive metanarrative. In Chile, however, *La Negra Ester* was subversive. The spectacle, viewed by millions, redefined corporeal behaviors and dialogically interweaved key ingredients present in the transition to democracy: desire, self-inflicted loss, sacrifice, and future happiness. The troupe's extended soliloquies strung together stylized tropes of 1930s folklore, 1980s repentance, and future utopian aspirations. Intertwining time and place, the protagonist Roberto navigated past nostalgia and present guilt. The doubling of the local and foreign, high and low, present and past, established a dialogical bond between actors and spectators that merged national popular conventions with transnational theatrical genres. The expressive capacity of bodies had the potential to regenerate collective interfaces and disrupt authoritarian conventions. Accustomed to an authoritarian regime with rigid social roles, the audience experienced communal participation.

The political right and left battled to define Chile's reconfigured social body, and the dictatorship's relationship with collective bodies had been shaped by disappearances, murders, and torture in the name of the internal security of the state. General Pinochet sought to legalize his mandate with a plebiscite. In 1988, the "Yes Campaign" focused on past violence, argued for the merits of dictatorship, and imagined the dictator as the guardian of peace and stability. In contrast, the opposition's "No Campaign" mostly avoided allusions to past trauma, a position that ignited a heated debate within the left. Rather than recalling assassinations, disappearances, and torture endured during the military regime, the opposition deployed marketing techniques, including its brand-logo (a rainbow) and the word "No". The message of unity was accompanied with the jingle: "Chile, la alegría ya viene". The opposition predicated an alternate mode of being in the world that omitted the structure of conflict fostered by the militant left and right.

Society was infused with fear and communal relations were permeated by mistrust. Latin America's left had primarily defined social commitment as active opposition to an established order. Rizk notes that to unmask "intereses materialistas en un mundo absolutamente escindido entre los que tienen y los que no" (Rizk 2004, 41). *La Negra Ester's* portrayal of grassroots cultures was hardly aligned with these ideals. Intellectuals had habitually aimed to inculcate an alternate social consciousness, yet had trouble adapting to the populations' reception of alternate non-politicized discourses. Following years of partisan debates, from the militant left and right, *La Negra Ester's* melodramatic plot, physicality, costumes, music, and staging reverberated with the

audience. The transition to democracy required alternate modes of collective interaction. For an emerging political culture, suggests Jacques Rancière, “[i]t is a matter of interpreting, in a theatrical sense of the word, the gap between the place where the demos exists and a place where it does not” (88). In counterintuitive fashion, a non-political and eroticized spectacle, coupled with vibrant sounds and colors, dislocated the apprehensions of a population accustomed to government surveillance.

La Negra Ester captured the theatrical scene amidst polarized politics and trauma. The play’s embodied scripts intersected transnational feminist movements, Liberation Theology, and gender politics. The spectacle, I suggest, belongs to the works that Carl Fischer proposes to include in “an archive of cultural production that questions narratives of economic exceptionalism and advocates for greater economic and sexual inclusiveness” (Fischer 8). Following the dirty wars of the 70s and 80s, corporeal discourses emerged to contest arenas unchallenged by heteronormative policymaking, and “dio paso al movimiento de liberación femenina y una apertura sexual que ha permitido el desarrollo de un discurso *gay* en las décadas siguientes” (54). *La Negra Ester*’s director, Andrés Pérez, was a beacon of Chile’s reformulation of gender conventions. With overwhelming popular support, *La Negra Ester* participated in the historical processes that redefined Chile’s social interactions. The play destabilized a structure of conflict by deploying an expressive capacity of bodies unaccustomed to being unbound. The theatrical blockbuster oscillated between staging alternate theatricalities, empowering consumerism, offering a novel worldview, and stereotyping local culture for mass consumption. The spectacle embodied a societal desire to overcome repression, and, introduced affective communal bonds that burst onto our monochrome streets. Rather than reflecting on oppositional scripts and militant practices, recycled in Leñero’s *Todos somos Marcos*, they play staged an alternate cultural interface. Andrés Pérez fatefully remarked: “Soy militante de la belleza” (*Memoria Chilena*). In memory of Roberto Parra and Andrés Pérez, the collaboration portrayed unimagined forms of socialization for adolescents like me, who grew up in a society dominated by fear.

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