

## Staging *Narcocorridos*: Las Reinas Chulas' Dissident Audio-Visual Performance

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Dressed in vibrantly colored corsets, skirts, cowboy hats, and boots, the women of Banda de Las Recodas are a sight for sore eyes. Taking their place on stage, the women introduce themselves as La Chakis, La Chikis, La Güera, and La Barbi; four sisters united in music making. However, the sisters' place on stage is behind microphones, not instruments. Instead, they have a full band, equally dressed in colorful outfits, whom they introduce as the bodies behind the sounds. Together, Banda de Las Recodas and their musicians perform a vast repertoire of *merengue*, *ranchera*, *cumbia electrodoméstica*, and *narcocorrido* pop songs. But, what exactly is *cumbia electrodoméstica*? *Narcocorrido* pop? For Banda de Las Recodas, making music is not just about fitting into a familiar genre, such as the *cumbia* or the *narcocorrido*, but about making meaningful connections between lyrics and sounds. As a result, a message of domestic abuse set to the sound of *cumbia* transforms the song into its own style, the *cumbia electrodoméstica*. Of specific interest in this work, however, is Banda de Las Recodas' (re)-interpretation of the *narcocorrido* as pop. In their song "Lo hecho en México," Banda de Las Recodas subverts the *narcocorrido* model, which is characterized by lyrical themes regarding drug trafficking, violence, and the Northern Mexican landscape set to *banda* or *norteña* musical compositions.<sup>1</sup> Satirically combining the cheerful, polka-like sound and scant vocal virtuosity of the *narcocorrido* genre with socially conscious lyrics, the song criticizes the violence committed against women in Ciudad Juárez. By connecting the *narcocorrido* style to atrocities that impact individual bodies and the nation collectively, "Lo hecho en México" offers a poignant social critique of the way in which a musical genre steeped in violence can reach immense levels of popularity while actual, suffering bodies never see jus-

tice. As a way of making this powerful commentary accessible to a vast and varied audience, Banda de Las Recodas also produced a recorded version and a music video of “Lo hecho en México,” which provide auditory and visual experiences that differ from the live transmission. At stake in exploring the audio-visual sensations embedded in both the live and recorded renditions is the way they engender an ethical consideration of how we listen and respond to musical messages.

### **Teatro-Cabaret and Banda de Las Recodas (a.k.a. Las Reinas Chulas)**

Revived in the 1980s in Mexico City, amidst natural disasters and economic collapse, *teatro-cabaret* represented, and continues to represent, an alternative to government-supported theatre practices. This autonomy has allowed *teatro-cabaret* a certain freedom to pose questions, concerns, and critiques of nation. As Gastón Alzate has suggested, sharing several similarities with its early twentieth-century predecessors – *teatro de carpa* and *teatro de revista* – *teatro-cabaret* epitomizes the nation’s long history of alternative cultural productions. Moreover, the genre represents a forum for performers, as well as the public, to comment on and satirize prevalent social issues that are often ignored in other performance spaces. As Alzate states, it is precisely the complex and contradictory notion of *mexicanidad* that is central to the work of *cabareteros* and *cabareteras*, “quienes intentan de muy diferentes modos cuestionar la cultura y la política oficiales, por medio de un rescate de manifestaciones populares y de modelos de feminidad y masculinidad” (17). Many of the performers continue their efforts to question official modes of *mexicanidad* beyond the physical space of the theatre, acting as activists in the community, openly voicing concerns about political transparency, human rights, and most recently, narco-related abuses. As a result, many performers of *teatro-cabaret* have been heralded as respected voices of critical dissidence.<sup>2</sup> Among the most notable *cabareteros* and *cabareteras* are Jesusa Rodríguez, Liliana Felipe, Astrid Hadad, and Tito Vasconcelos. These four figures, along with many other lesser-known participants, are broadly recognized for revitalizing and evolving the Mexican *teatro-cabaret* style into its current form.

The four female performers of Banda de Las Recodas – Ana Francis Mor, Cecilia Sotres, Marisol Gasé and Nora Huerta – are alternatively known as Las Reinas Chulas, a Mexico-City-based *teatro-cabaret* group.<sup>3</sup> In typical *teatro-cabaret* tradition, the women use artistic practices such as music, dance, costume, make-up, performance space, and the audience to

critically examine current social, political, and cultural conditions. As theatre performers, Las Reinas Chulas formally studied theatre at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) as well as with many of the aforementioned renowned Mexican *teatro-cabaret* practitioners. Their exposure to the musical work of Liliana Felipe and Astrid Hadad has informed the way in which Las Recodas make music. In particular, the work of Felipe, described as “some of the most political, feminist, irreverent, and derisive composition in contemporary Mexico” (Gutiérrez 11), has likely informed the kinds of critical commentaries that Banda de las Recodas makes through their lyrics. Likewise, the exposure to Hadad’s style of satirical “recycling”<sup>4</sup> perhaps served as inspiration for Banda de Las Recodas’ re-working of genres such as the *narcocorrido*. Referring to her own work as “heavy nopal aesthetics,” Hadad combines a visual inversion of iconic Mexican symbols and re-interpretations of popular musical genres, such as the *ranchera*. As Alzate describes, “el objetivo fundamental de Hadad es repetir símbolos archiconocidos por los mexicanos, pero transformándolos en una suerte de pastiche, cargado de ironía, cuyo referente es la actual situación política de su patria” (51). Hence, Banda de Las Recodas’ *narcocorrido* pop can be situated within this lineage of sonic and visual practices that blend serious commentaries with satirical presentations.

The productions that Ana Francis, Marisol, Nora, and Cecilia present, as “musicians” and *cabareteras*, do not happen in a vacuum. Having worked with *teatro-cabaret* notables, Las Reinas Chulas have not had to struggle to find an audience or a voice. In 2005, the women assumed control of Mexico City theatre El Hábito, once run by their cabaret predecessors, Rodríguez and Felipe. Renaming the theatre El Vicio, Las Reinas Chulas have kept the tradition alive for the last eight years. The women perform regularly and also invite other local *teatro-cabaret* artists to entertain audiences, continuing the legacy begun by their predecessors.

### **Banda de Las Recodas**

While Banda de Las Recodas was conceived as just another *teatro-cabaret* production, the group has gained popularity and taken on a life of its own.<sup>5</sup> Filtering socio-politically engaged commentaries through satirical lyrics and music videos accessible via iTunes and YouTube, the group reaches an audience base far beyond the confines of the stage. Moreover, Banda de Las Recodas’ stage is not limited to El Vicio. Much like their *teatro-cabaret* predecessors, the group has traveled around Mexico City to venues such as

El Teatro de la Ciudad and the Center of Tlalpan,<sup>6</sup> and internationally to La MaMa theatre in New York City. Furthermore, their work extends beyond the confines of the theatre space to television, media campaigns, workshops on teatro-cabaret, and participation in the annual International Cabaret Festival in Mexico City. What sets Banda de Las Recodas apart in their activities beyond the stage, though, is the way they present themselves as musical artists rather than theatre practitioners. Effectively, Banda de Las Recodas has become an alter-ego for the four women of Las Reinas Chulas, and as such, the group conducts interviews with local press agents to discuss their performances, musical motivations, and group history. As a result, Banda de Las Recodas' accessibility and publicity has undeniably contributed to their transformation from a *teatro-cabaret* group into a separate entity. This complicated construction of identities is a conscious effort meant to unsettle audience perceptions of stability and thereby promote critical consideration of events and information.

In the specific example of "Lo hecho en México," Banda de Las Recodas uses the *narcocorrido* genre to offer a critical perspective of contemporary Mexican life.<sup>7</sup> However, this perspective is based on an "insider status" that is both veridical and fictional, derived from their daily-lived experiences as Mexicans and from the backstory that the group has created for themselves. As the fictional "Las Hermanas Carrillo," the four women present themselves as sisters from Los Mochis, Sinaloa, born one day apart from one another: "La Chikis," "La Chakis," "La Barbi," and "La Güera." According to the sisters, when they were just four days old, their mother killed their father, and finding her children so appalling, she abandoned them. Orphaned and helpless, the sisters decided to enter the world of drugs: "nos vimos en la necesidad de emprender el emporio que ahora manejamos: sembramos grandes cantidades de mariguana y lechuga." The women describe themselves as being at the vanguard of the drug industry, having started their business long before cartel violence graced the front page of every newspaper in Mexico. Thus, their reach spans far and wide, causing other cartels to fear them. Yet, as the four sisters recount, they grew tired of being millionaire narcos and decided to embark on a new adventure: "y sin talento, así que dijimos, vamos a hacer un grupo." According to La Güera, "sólo nos hacía falta ser famosas para ser perfectas. Somos millonarias de dinero pero pobres musicalmente. Recodas, más bien."<sup>8</sup>

In this last comment, linking musical poverty to their name, the women of Banda de Las Recodas are not just criticizing themselves, but also

what they perceive to be the question of talent, or lack thereof, within the world of popular music. Specifically, the group's name is a reference to the internationally successful all-male band, Banda el Recodo, which became popular by paying homage to their Northern Mexican roots, playing *banda* music, and naming itself after the small Sinaloan town of el Recodo. During a career that spans over 65 years and 160 albums, Banda el Recodo "still remain(s) relevant by sticking to its folksy roots and its huge ensemble" (Burr 43). From the perspective of Banda de Las Recodas, that the all-male group has never evolved musically or thematically is an example of both cultural stasis and the lack of critical thought behind popular music. By transforming the name into Banda de Las Recodas, the women satirize their counter-part rather than flatter them. Ultimately, the women present themselves not as an alternative to, but as a critique of the musical trend in *banda* as well as *narcocorrido* productions, where shallow content and the all-male cast of Banda el Recodo are the norm rather than the exception.

Though the group's fictional story and commentary on musical talent are humorous, Banda de Las Recodas also offers a broader consideration about the way in which violent (male) drug lords control cultural products. Their tongue-in-cheek story about turning to drugs for lack of other financial means is not too far from the reality that many Northern Mexicans actually experience. Faced with few means of providing for themselves and their families, many have found themselves in business with cartels. By juxtaposing the group's fictional "arrival" into the *narco* world with an acknowledgement of the power that characterizes Mexico's *narco* leaders, Banda de Las Recodas uses humor to forefront a problem that plagues Mexican society. As Alzate states, one of the most salient characteristics of this group is the construction of female characters that "sirven de plataforma hacia un cuestionamiento de los mecanismos del poder y la exclusión social" ("Dramaturgia" 58). By re-interpreting musical styles associated with the *narcos* to critique *narco* culture as well as broader ills in Mexican society, Banda de Las Recodas suggests the possibility for theatre to promote change. More specifically, Banda de Las Recodas' use of a consciously constructed alter-ego signals the falsity upon which cultural productions, such as the *narcocorrido*, are created, thereby prompting spectators to become more critically aware of what it is they are consuming.

### **"Lo hecho en México" as Subversion**

Banda de Las Recodas' song, "Lo hecho en México," though technically not a *narcocorrido*,<sup>9</sup> uses that musical genre to address the acts of

violence committed against women. Since the mid-1990s, the border city of Ciudad Juárez has experienced startling rates of femicide. In the 1960s, factories known as *maquiladoras* began to appear along the U.S.-Mexican border in accordance with the Border Industrialization Program. Initially, the construction of these factories was meant to assuage the number of unemployed Mexicans returning home after the Bracero Program officially ended.<sup>10</sup> However, the term *maquiladora* quickly became synonymous with exploitation as foreign companies took advantage of Mexican bodies as cheap labor and used Mexican land as a dumping ground for waste. By the 1994 signing of NAFTA, these factories had irreversibly transformed border cities such as Ciudad Juárez. Over the last several decades, women from all over Mexico have increasingly migrated to Ciudad Juárez in search of factory work, partially motivated by the way factory owners give preference to female labor.<sup>11</sup> Yet, the promise of employment has come at a price, especially for the young, single women who have become targets of violent acts. Since the Ciudad Juárez femicides began in 1993, with many of the women identified as factory workers, no one has been officially charged nor have the murders stopped. As Diana Washington Valdéz reports, “many women’s murders, regardless of the motive, [are] unpunished crimes, and that made their deaths an issue of justice” (65). This commentary signals the confusion about who is committing these crimes and why, questions that remain unanswered. Since many of the women are never found, local citizens and family members erect pink crosses bearing the women’s names, which, in lieu of official gravesites, have become emblematic of Ciudad Juárez’s losses. The Mexican government’s inability or unwillingness to identify perpetrators and stop these crimes has captured the international attention of groups such as Amnesty International and even major Hollywood film companies.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, “Lo hecho en México,” can be situated within a larger context of voices clamoring for justice and recognition.

### **The Auditory Performance of “Lo hecho en México”**

Because “Lo hecho en México” is available as a recording, the ephemerality of the stage performance can be remembered through the “archive,”<sup>13</sup> through the opportunity to listen to the song over and over again long after the show has ended. More specifically, accessing “Lo hecho en México” as recorded track versus performance holds significant ramifications for how listeners and audience members interpret the song as well as how they interpret the work of the musical group. Musical recordings allow

people to disassemble Banda de Las Recodas' work into individual songs and videos without any concept of the bigger picture. Effectively, a listener can come across the work of Banda de Las Recodas on iTunes or YouTube without any idea that the group is Las Reinas Chulas' theatrical take on music making. However, being a (theatre) audience member implies a certain kind of knowledge that what they are about to see is not a concert, but a musically-based theatre piece. While this may not always be the case, as when the women performed in the center of Tlalpan for a somewhat unsuspecting audience, the stage, makeup, and outfits function to set Banda de Las Recodas apart from non-theatrical recording artists. Having first come into contact with the work of Banda de Las Recodas via iTunes, I was prompted to do a kind of "close-listening" that has allowed me to hone in on and appreciate the performative strategies used in a live rendition.

Behind the microphones, the women of Banda de Las Recodas vocally assume their roles as "Las Hermanas Carrillo." These female voices, as music critic Simon Frith explains, take on a "singer's vocal personality," which in a sense relies on them "putting on a vocal costume, enacting the role that they are playing for ourselves" (198). This vocal costume is one specific to the *narcocorrido*, which employs vocal plurality as the women's voices are heard individually and collectively. Furthermore, this vocal costume emulates the stereotypical Chalino Sánchez sound of both the *narcocorrido* genre and Northern Mexico accents.<sup>14</sup> What is important about this vocal transformation is the way it aurally distances Banda de Las Recodas from their Las Reinas Chulas counterparts. Yet, for a listener otherwise unfamiliar with Las Reinas Chulas or the Banda de Las Recodas, this vocal costume serves to solidify the women's status as a musical group. The role of the voice in establishing Banda de Las Recodas as a viable group seems to capture Frith's observation that "the voice, in short, may or may not be a key to someone's identity, but it is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we're not" (197). It is clear that the four women of Las Reinas Chulas are pretending to be something they are not: Sinaloan drug dealers and music makers. Hence, their vocal transformation into La Chakis, La Chikis, La Güera, and La Barbi seems fundamental to understanding how Banda de Las Recodas has gained notoriety as more than just another *teatro-cabaret* piece.

In order to perform and parody the *narcocorrido* genre, the women's singing voices mimic the Sinaloan sound. As voice scholar Madlen Dolar suggests, "the regional accent can easily be dealt with, it can be described

and codified” (14). In this case, the voices of Banda de Las Recodas reproduce the “high-pitched, nasal quality” and colloquialisms characteristic of Northern Mexican speech patterns (Simonette 220). However, what distinguishes the “Lo hecho en México” performance from the typical *narcocorrido* model is the use of both singing and speaking voices. Singing blurs the words and can sacrifice meaning for the sake of the sound of the voice. As Dolar states, “singing represents a different stage: it brings the voice energetically to the forefront, on purpose, at the expense of meaning... indeed, singing is bad communication; it prevents a clear understanding of the text” (30). As such, meaning can be located beyond the linguistic; without understanding the words, listeners or audience members can still enjoy the sound of the voice. Yet, the women of Banda de Las Recodas do not want their message lost in the “bad communication” of their singing voices; they want listeners to enjoy their music *and* understand the meaning of their words.

Alternating between singing and speaking vocal registers, Banda de Las Recodas requires active listening practices. During the sung portions of the song, listeners enjoy the sound of the familiar *narcocorrido* voice, though they are better able to hear the content and glean some level of meaning during the spoken sections. I say “glean” because even the spoken parts are difficult to understand. La Chakis, La Chikis, La Güera, and La Barbi do not necessarily blur their words, but rather speed up the presentation of information, thereby forcing their listeners to pay close attention. Between the blurred words and fast-talking, Banda de Las Recodas has their listeners hanging on every word, wanting to hear more, wanting to make sense of the song. It is, then, through these vocal transitions that Banda de Las Recodas captures and sustains their listeners’ attention with the story of Mexico’s lost women. This approach to performing emphasizes the alienation that the women of Ciudad Juárez experience. Banda de Las Recodas gives voices to the injustices often silenced or ignored by the Mexican government.

Several elements of the women’s vocal performances provoke both laughter and serious thought. The song begins with the spoken lines, “Isma me dijo cómo le haré para morir en México / Y pasar bien desapercibida,” which transition into the sung lyrics “Y dije ‘me voy a morir / Ahora sí les muero todita/ No más déjenme me callo el lugar/ Onde desfallecerme solita.”” On one hand, this speaking/singing voice provides some of the basic elements of the pre-fabricated *narcocorrido* format: reference to place, topic, and receiver. Additionally, this voice replicates the characteristic vocal quality of the *narcocorrido*, which as *banda* scholar Helena Simonette de-



tails, employs a dead-pan language and performance style so that “even the most melodramatic incidents are described in this matter-of-fact manner” (223). On the other hand, the song does not follow the traditional thematic requirements for a *narcocorrido*, and thus, startles its listeners. It is not the topic of dying itself that is unnerving to the listener, but rather the woman’s emotionless voice as she recounts the grim details of her own death. Banda de las Recodas could have elected to use a more emotive vocal quality, like that of the *ranchera*. However, their use of the *narcocorrido*’s dead-pan delivery is a conscious one. The disconnect between theme and style sends a mixed message to the audience as to whether it is to be considered a parody or to be taken seriously.

Near the middle of the song, the speaking Sinaloan voices return to a conversation amongst themselves and with their listeners. For example, the first-person narrator addresses the listener(s) directly:

Sí, voy a pedirles un favor

Que no se culpe a naiden por mi muerte

Últimadamente quién me manda a andar de liosa naciendo en México

Habiendo tanto pinche continente

Interrupted by another voice, “Ah no, vieja y la Ciudad Juárez ha culera una,” the verse concludes with a second petition to the listener(s): “Y sí les voy a pedir que ahorita mismo gritemos todos juntos.” At this point the listener notices something different about the song: it is a live recording. As the second voice chimes in with commentary about Ciudad Juárez, the recording reveals the sounds of laughter, and more specifically, audience laughter. It is also at this point that the listener understands that they can laugh, too. This laughter, though, is a response both to the humorous delivery of the words and to a feeling of discomfort. The references to Ciudad Juárez and death immediately conjure up images of femicide. Banda de Las Recodas is not making light of these tragic deaths, but rather using humor to critique and subvert the government’s narrative of blame and inaction. For example, the narrator’s assumption of responsibility for her own death because she chose to be born in Mexico forcefully reproaches the way officials blame the victims. Furthering their critique, Banda de Las Recodas invites their audience and listeners to join them in counting their blessings:

Benditas (coro)

Benditas sean las leyes son

Benditas (coro)

Bendita la justicia son

Bendita (coro)

Bendito los gobiernos son

Benditos (coro)

Benditos los hombres y las mujeres que respeten el derecho de toda mujer a malmorir.

While this chorus of bodies honoring the way Mexico's (in)active government has broadly "protected" human rights is a powerful commentary about the nation's violence, Banda de Las Recodas brings the topic back to the women of Juárez. During the final spoken verse of the song, La Chikis, La Chakis, La Güera, and La Barbi repeat these blessings, but only invite the women to join them: "Sólo las damitas eh? —Only Ladies—Sólo las damitas/ Nos ayuden con sus palmitas." This request for applause is reminiscent of the way in which *narcocorridos* laud the violent conquests of drug dealers. However, this is a socially conscious applause. By isolating the women in the audience, Banda de Las Recodas transforms the act of clapping into one of awareness about the way only women are targeted in Ciudad Juárez. Though much of "Lo hecho en México" focuses on one example of femicide, there are moments when the singular becomes emblematic of the plural. In other words, the female narrator becomes part of a greater pandemic as the women of Banda de Las Recodas sing of an abused "we."

Que nos violen

Que nos mutilen

Que nos degüellen

Que nos ultrajen

Que nos maquilén

Que nos empaquen

Que nos exporten

Que no pregunten

Que no investiguen

Que nos oculten

Que nos desollen

Que nos entierren

Que nos secuestren

Que nos desnuden

Que nos desnuden

Que nos desmiembren

Que no castiguen

Que nos olviden

The first few lines reveal the level of violence that this collective female “we” experiences. Yet, the list seems to go on and on, emphasizing the gravity of the situation in Ciudad Juárez. Despite the blurring of their words, the length of the list ensures that the listener and audience understand at least some of the examples. Furthermore, this list appears twice during the song: the first time following the exclamatory blessings of various Mexican institutions and the second time following the request for applause. The length of this segment, along with the repetition and the call for choral applause and blessings, seems to hyperbolize the horrific violence against women in Ciudad Juárez. However, Banda de Las Recodas is not exaggerating these kinds of deaths; the band triggers an emotional reaction in listeners and audiences. Much like the beginning of the song, what is striking about the litany of ways to die is the way they are sung devoid of emotional reactions. As previously mentioned, these emotionless voices do more than simply comply with the classic *narcocorrido* mode; they are a conscious decision. In the above example, the dead-pan voices function to estrange the gruesomeness of the crimes from reality, that combined with satirical interjections like “Don’t bother investigating,” or “Don’t bother punishing,” signal a broader societal desensitization, almost to the point of humorous absurdity.

The element of social desensitization can be further explored in terms of the overall sonic quality of the *narcocorrido*. In addition to the vocal similarities between the *narcocorrido* genre and Banda de Las Recodas’ version, the group also uses typical *norteña* and *banda* accompaniment. These two styles primarily differ in terms of instrumentation and geographical location: *norteña* is characterized by its use of the accordion and its localization in northeastern Mexico, while *banda* uses brass sounds and is identified with northwestern Mexico. Yet, the two styles do not generally differ in their rhythmic construction and both are reminiscent of polka music. Composed around a 2/4 time signature, both *banda* and *norteña* produce a sound that can be characterized as upbeat or having a vibrant quality. I use these adjectives because, much like polka music, *banda* and *norteña* are popular for dancing. For example, the dance style known as *quebradita* is commonly associated with *banda* and *norteña* music, and is especially popular in nightclubs that play these kinds of songs. As a result, it is interesting to consider why the *narcocorrido* genre, one that primarily venerates drug lords and violence, would be accompanied by this kind of dance sound. One possibility is that the genre’s composers and commissioners consider

drug exploits as something worthy of celebration, and hence want the music to be danceable.

In the case of “Lo hecho en México,” the song uses *norteña* and *banda* structures and the sounds of audience participation as sonic accompaniment for the socially conscious lyrics. Moreover, Banda de Las Recodas employs these specific sounds as a way to provoke an ethical approach to listening. By combining the song’s critical content with the danceable quality of *norteña* and *banda* music, the song provokes a kind of jarring disconnect for the listener. By connecting grisly lyrical descriptions of how women are killed with the upbeat sounds of the accordion, Banda de Las Recodas seeks to prompt the listener into re-considering appropriate listener responses: Should I stop tapping my foot to the beat? How (un)acceptable is it that this rhythm makes me want to dance? However, Banda de Las Recodas does not explicitly offer any answers. Rather, they invite the ladies of the audience to clap with them while they once more sing the list of ways to die, enhancing the song’s cheerful tone. It is, then, through this act of audience participation that Banda de Las Recodas hopes their audience and listeners will answer their own questions. Specifically, this invitation to clap causes the audience members and listeners to feel uncomfortable about their actions and recognize that the song is anything but cheerful. Ultimately, by setting the lyrics against the backdrop of an up-beat sound and clapping, Banda de Las Recodas creates a multi-dimensional critique: of the reverence that the *narcocorrido* genre receives despite the seeming celebration of violent and illegal acts, the discourse that women are at fault for their own murders, and the “good job” the Mexican government has done in trying to ignore and deny the continual acts of femicide.

### **The Audio-Visual Performance of “Lo hecho en México”**

Similar to being able to listen to “Lo hecho en México” as a recording or live, the performance can be appreciated visually either on-stage or as a music video. Because Banda de Las Recodas was originally conceived as a theatre piece, Las Reinas Chulas deliberately use costumes (including vocal), makeup, humor, the space of the stage, and projections as part of the overall performance. Viewers who see Banda de Las Recodas at a theatre like El Vicio are likely aware that the performance is a *teatro-cabaret* piece and not a concert. Instead, they are likely aware that they are about to see a carefully constructed transmission of socially conscious commentaries filtered through this fictional musical group. These assumptions, however, are

complicated by Banda de Las Recodas's performances outside the theatre space, such as in the center of Tlalpan, which will be the basis for my analysis of the live performance.<sup>15</sup> Yet, even those who stop to watch, without any previous knowledge of the group Las Reinas Chulas, or *teatro-cabaret*, quickly realize they are not watching a typical concert.

The audio-visual details of Banda de Las Recodas' live performance signal its satirical nature to the spectators, even those unaware of the show's theatrical origin. For example, the refrain, "Somos Recodas," is heard throughout the entire performance; Las Recodas sing it before the four women introduce themselves, between songs, after jokes, and during any technical glitches that may occur. The repetition of these two words not only make the audience laugh, but also make La Chakis, La Chikis, La Güera, and La Barbi laugh at themselves. As a result, even unsuspecting audiences understand that these women are making fun of both themselves and their musical ineptitude. Furthermore, this repetition connects parts of the performance, such as individual songs, to the broader theatrical performance that is Banda de Las Recodas. Consequently, live audiences are less able to aurally de-contextualize the group and their music, as is possible with online-only exposure, and although some audience members may leave during a performance, they still possess a broader understanding of Banda de Las Recodas' performance style and satirical character than listeners who have no relationship with the live transmission.

In addition to these aural clues, the visual cues help to underscore the satirical nature of the production. The cowboy hats, skirts, corsets, and boots conjure up images of the *narcocorrido* as well as stereotypical Northern fashion styles. As Alejandro Madrid explains, the *norteña* persona is embodied by "*vaquero* attire, sometimes wearing the traditional *cuera* (a brown leather jacket typical from Tamaulipas State) or a long-sleeved square-patterened shirt, but always cowboy boots and Tejano hat" (85). However, Banda de Las Recodas' clothing is colorful, almost excessively so, patching together pink, orange, green, yellow and blue, a fashion trend most definitely not characteristic of *narcocorrido* musicians or Northern Mexico. Furthermore, as they take their places behind the microphones, the audience realizes this musical "group" does not even play their own instruments. The women then introduce their musicians: a group of 4 men dressed in outfits that equally seem to ridicule the *narcocorrido* style. Much like Madrid's description, the men enter in cowboy hats, sunglasses, patterned shirts, and tight pants. The location of their instruments behind Las Recodas

indicates that while the men are indispensable for the sonic production, they are not the focal point of the performance. Rather, this division of the stage indicates that Las Recodas and their singing/spoken performances are of prime importance. Ultimately, given the spatial division between Las Recodas and their musicians, the exaggerated outfits and the refrain “Somos Recodas,” even an unsuspecting spectator soon recognizes the theatricality of the performance.

It is within this theatricality and sense of satire that the song “Lo hecho en México” strikes a different chord with its serious lyrical message and projected video about feminicide. While all of Las Recodas’ songs include a video in every live performance, the video for “Lo hecho en México” is different. Although other videos capture Banda de Las Recodas dancing in their costumes, walking around Mexico City, or even acting the theme of a song, the video for “Lo hecho en México” is noticeably different. Audiences see a panning shot of a desert landscape void of bodies: the landscape of Ciudad Juárez. At the same time, Las Recodas begin their story of how women die unnoticed. The combination of these words and images causes the mood of the performance to change noticeably. The audience becomes still and quiet, taking in the projected video and words the four women sing. Further contributing to this atmosphere are Las Recodas themselves; they do not clap or dance, as they do during other songs, but rather stand still behind their microphones.

The video of “Lo hecho en México” is available to all on YouTube. Created to accompany the live performance, its availability online allows it to take on a different meaning and message. Like listening to the isolated example of “Lo hecho en México,” watching its video creates an experience wholly different for viewers unfamiliar with Banda de Las Recodas and the broader context of *teatro-cabaret*. More specifically, the video online creates a sense of alienation due to the fact that Banda de Las Recodas does not even appear in the music video. Their voices are merely a soundtrack to the video.

In *Music Video and the Politics of Representation*, Diane Railton and Paul Watson propose four music video styles that can be used to analyze almost any production: The Pseudo-Documentary Music Video, The Art Music Video, The Narrative Music Video, and the Staged Performance Music Video. The video of “Lo hecho en México” blends the Narrative and Pseudo-documentary genres. The first uses “the aesthetics of documentary realism to portray the ‘working life’ of the band or artist and, as such, func-

tions to legitimate them as skilled, professional, musicians,” thereby creating the sensation that the viewer has gained privileged access into the world of music making (49). In addition, the documentary film genre presupposes a kind of truthfulness; the content is not fictional and the images are not edited or enhanced.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, the Narrative video is defined as telling a story, which may or may not be true, through visual cues “that, on one hand, variously illustrate, complement, or extend the lyrical content of the song, or on the other hand, function independently of it” (55).

“Lo hecho en México” contains segments from the documentary, *Bajo Juárez: La ciudad devorando a sus hijas*, directed by Alejandra Sánchez and José Antonio Cordero,<sup>17</sup> which would seem to situate the video outside of the categories Railton and Watson propose. However, by using filmed materials already handled by a director and editing staff, Banda de Las Recodas further edits and selects the materials for their video. As a result, what the viewer sees are portions of the film that Banda de Las Recodas has re-contextualized to fit the parameters of their performance. In this sense, their visual re-presentation of the documentary tells a story complimented by the off-screen (non-diegetic) singing voices, much like a narrative video. Yet, unlike most of the examples Railton and Watson discuss, neither the lyrics of “Lo hecho en México” nor its images tell a linear story of events and resolution. Consequently, the additional element of the documentary style suggests that quotidian life in Juárez is the story and that life itself in the border town is fragmented and incomplete.

The music video for “Lo hecho en México” juxtaposes the song’s emotionless vocals, satirical lyrics, and upbeat music with images related to feminicide in Ciudad Juárez to critique the violence committed against women. As such, the video employs *Bajo Juárez*’s documentary techniques to present a presumably unfiltered view of the devastating impact feminicides have on actual inhabitants of the border city. One of the implications of combining the sound and visual imagery is that Banda de Las Recodas gives faces and bodies to the lyrical “I” and “we” that suffer in their song. For example, the opening lines about a young woman whose death will go unnoticed is visually connected to the landscape of Ciudad Juárez, proclaimed to be the most important city in the state of Chihuahua. In this sense, the video complements the lyrics, immediately localizing the song’s reference point to the border town before the words do. In addition, even before the “I” and “we” are expressed lyrically, the video relates the faces of individual and collective groups of female factory workers. Furthermore, the first time

the voices speak directly to the crowd, asking that no one be blamed for the feminicides, the video shows women protesting the disappearances, holding pictures of missing women and women in factory uniforms. At the end of the song, as the voices sing the various ways to die, the video presents images of mothers and sisters mourning what are likely their dead. These connections between the lyrics and the visual stimuli transform the idea of abused women into actual victims of the song's long list of violent actions.

Another implication for considering the music video in relation to the song itself is the way moments of disconnect among the sounds, words and images shake an audience out of a state of complacency and desensitization. As the voices sing, "Lo hecho en México está bien hecho" for the first time, the video focuses on men putting up crosses and checking their work. Effectively, this imagery proposes that the dead and missing women are a part of every-day life.. Perhaps more disconcerting is the disjuncture between the image of an all-male band and the singing female voices. Banda de Las Recodas is supposedly an all-female ensemble, hence the question: Why include an all-male band in the video? As previously stated, using the *narcocorrido* to present a critically engaged social commentary is part of the female group's re-representation of the genre. Additionally, the women visually highlight the *narcocorrido*'s male dominance, one that Banda de Las Recodas seeks to unsettle. Yet, the presence of this all-male band prompts a question about Banda de Las Recodas' music making: Who is playing the music? Close observation reveals that the men are playing out of sync with the song, but this does not affirm that the female group is actually playing the instruments. However, the feminine voices make it abundantly clear that these men are not the singers. What is even more striking is that the female voices are disembodied from their first-person or communal experiences. Separating the body from the voice that tells Imsa how she will die or the collective "we" whose bodies have been subjected to extreme violence suggests that these fictional protagonists may belong to the list of disappeared women. Furthermore, extracting the voice may reflect how voices of the dead and disappeared women of Juárez can be heard, filtered through the bodies of the living.

Part of what these living bodies call attention to through the disconnectedness between the sonic and visual elements is the lack of official response to the killings. The pink crosses appear again and again throughout the video, coinciding with the voices that bless various Mexican institutions and the voices that call for female-only applause. These sounds of audience



applause accompany the final moments of the video, which capture families in mourning; the intimate images of mothers and sisters laying flowers on gravesites contrast with the seemingly cheerful act of clapping and *norteña* music. The power of this sonic and visual experience is such that the listener/viewer is prompted to consider the seemingly inappropriate nature of clapping at a family's loss. Additionally, this contrast underscores the way in which Mexico's institutions, to whom Banda de Las Recodas and their audience give praise for inactivity, do not take responsibility for protecting its female citizens or even erect these memorial sites.

### Conclusion

For viewers without prior knowledge about Banda de Las Recodas, the group's lack of visual presence in the video raises questions about who the group is and if they really perform their own music. The same could be said of Banda de Las Recodas' other videos on YouTube, in which the women are present, but never sing or play instruments. Additionally, to those exposed only to the recordings of Las Recodas' songs, the sounds of audience participation prompt similar questions about the targeted audience and how popular they are as a group. However, the answers to all these questions are easy for audiences that experience the live performance: Banda de Las Recodas is a *teatro-cabaret* production that utilizes music to filter socio-political critiques about Mexico. Therefore, what is important is not that the women play instruments themselves, but the meaning located within the music itself. As an extension of this, the videos were never meant to highlight the group's musical skills, but rather to provide visual enhancements for the lyrical and sonic compositions. Much like the way the historical *corrido* singer served as the voice of the people, Banda de Las Recodas becomes a conduit for the expression of concerns about and critiques of modern-day Mexican life. Separate from their own bodies, they represent multiple personalities: an "I," a "we," a Northern Mexican, a Mexico united, all calling attention to critical social issues.

The sometimes jarring disconnect between the lyrics and danceable *norteña* sounds of "Lo hecho en México" is not a technique unique to Banda de Las Recodas. Informed by Astrid Hadad's "heavy nopal" aesthetic and Liliana Felipe's critically engaged compositions, Banda de Las Recodas shares in their artistic mission to cultivate active listeners by breaking down boundaries between musical styles and socially conscious content.<sup>18</sup> Yet, what sets Banda de Las Recodas apart from Hadad, Felipe, and oth-

er *teatro-cabaret* practitioners is their accessibility on and off stage. The group's interviews with the press, stage performances, and online presence have reached a broader audience base than most *teatro-cabaret* works. As such, the various ways of experiencing Banda de Las Recodas' repertoire allows for a myriad of reactions to and interpretations of their work. And yet, in spite of the different approaches to listening to and/or watching "Lo hecho en México," listeners and viewers alike erect these memorial sites or can appreciate the song as a powerful critique of the *narcocorrido*'s place in Mexican society and the way gendered violence continues to ravage the nation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the "Lo hecho en México video," see < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5lkdSQVIm80>>

<sup>2</sup> Alzate's work, *Teatro de Cabaret: Imaginarios Disidentes*, explores different performers linked to *teatro-cabaret* and the way their bodies and performances capture efforts to resist and re-imagine models of *mexicanidad*

<sup>3</sup> For more information about Las Reinas Chulas, see <[http://www.lasreinaschulas.com/rch/01quienes\\_rch.htm](http://www.lasreinaschulas.com/rch/01quienes_rch.htm)>

<sup>4</sup> See Gutiérrez 79.

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with Ana Francis Mor in August, 2013. She stated that the group "tiene vida propia."

<sup>6</sup> Banda de Las Recodas performed in Tlalpan's city center as part of the XI Festival Internacional de Cabaret in 2013. Throughout this article, I use this performance to analyze the live transmission of Las Recodas' repertoire, performatic style, and ways this non-theatre setting complicates audience understanding and response.

<sup>7</sup> Simonette's work in *Banda: Mexican Musical Life Across Borders* explores how like modern-day *corridos*, *narcocorridos* also commonly rely on *banda* or *norteña* musicians to perform the compositions. Since the 1970s, the descriptions of idyllic landscapes and war heroes have been replaced by an updated pre-fabricated model that focuses on the valiant, macho drug trafficker, the faithful female companion, and the traitor. An important factor for determining the content is whether the *narcocorrido* is commissioned or commercial. In the commercial pieces, "the protagonists present in these *narcocorridos* are characters or prototypes of the narco, mystified and made into a marketable commodity" (Simonette, 325). The commissioned productions, however, are not generally recorded or released for mass consumption. Rather, these songs are played in the presence of the commissioner at private parties or local clubs. For more information about the relationship between *banda* and *norteña* music and *narcocorridos*, see chapters 5 and 6 in Madrid's work, *Music in Mexico: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture*. For more details about the character prototypes of the *narcocorrido*, see Lara's article, "'Salieron de San Isidro...': El corrido, El narcocorrido y tres de sus categorías de análisis: El hombre, la mujer y el soplón. Un acercamiento etnográfico."

<sup>8</sup> See "Vamos mejor a votar por cárteles en vez de partidos: Las Recodas."

<sup>9</sup> The *narcocorrido* genre is not characterized by musical composition, but by its lyrics. In a personal interview with the composer for Banda de Las Recodas, Yurief Nieves, in August, 2013, he explained that to be considered a *narcocorrido*, the theme needs to be about drugs. As a result, this is not a *narcocorrido* in theme, but in composition an example of *música norteña*.

<sup>10</sup> The official duration of the Bracero Program was from 1942-1964. The program began during WWII as the United States experienced a lack of manual labor caused by wartime military participation. See Cohen's book, *Braceros: Migrant Citizens and Transnational Subjects in the Postwar United States and Mexico*.

<sup>11</sup> Prieto states, "female labor is cheaper than its male counterpart, and endowed with social attributes that permit the exercise of a greater degree of control" (xxiv). Furthermore, women tend to be less vocal about the exploitative work environments and less likely to protest.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Jennifer Lopez was the leading actress in the film, *Bordertown*, released in 2007. In addition the documentary, *Bajo Juárez: La ciudad devorando a sus hijas* was released in 2006. With specific focus on the maquiladoras in Tijuana, the documentary *Maquilopolis: City of Factories* was released in 2006. I do not know the specific year "Lo hecho en México" was written, but Banda de Las Recodas produced it within the timespan of 2004-2009.

<sup>13</sup> As Taylor proposes in her work, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, the repertoire of performed actions and embodied practices are important sites of intellectual inquiry. As opposed to the archive, representing both a physical preservation site and the permanent existence of sources, the repertoire is characterized by its ephemerality.

<sup>14</sup> The popularity of the local Sinaloan sound that has come to represent the *narcocorrido* became embodied in the voice of Chalino Sánchez. Not only was Chalino Sánchez beloved, but since his murder in 1992, his voice has reached a new level of notoriety; it has become a quintessential element of the *narcocorrido*. See Simonette's article, "Narcocorridos: An Emerging Micromusic of Nuevo L.A."

<sup>15</sup> As previously noted, Banda de Las Recodas' performance at the center of Talpan, as part of the XI Festival Internacional de Cabaret, is the basis for this analysis.

<sup>16</sup> For more information about the "truthful" qualities ascribed to documentary filmmaking, see Beattie, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Personal interview with Ana Francis Mor, August 2013.

<sup>18</sup> See Alzate's chapters on Hadad and Jesusa Rodríguez and Liliana Felipe in *Imagarios Disidentes* and Gutiérrez's chapter on Hadad in *Performing Mexicanidad*.

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