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IN POSSESSION OF A STOLEN WEAPON

FROM JOHN GAY'S MACHEATH TO RUBÉN BLADES' PEDRO NAVAJA

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Abstract

This article analyses the cult salsa song “Pedro Navaja” by Panamanian artist Rubén Blades and the relevance of narrating such a genre peculiar to dancing, an analysis in accordance with adaptation theory outlined by Linda Hutcheon, and a Brechtian semiotic methodology which combines *Gestus* with theories of the sign. “Pedro Navaja” is arguably a re-writing of “Mack the Knife” – or *Die Moritat von Mackie Messer* – one which contains, as a sort of *mise-en-abyme*, elements not only of Kurt Weill’s song, but of both John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera* and Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*. This study focuses on the fertile adaptation history of the highwayman Macheath since Gay’s work, on close-readings of “Pedro Navaja” – a narrativized cerebral salsa song – and on the ethics of adapting a character, story or genre. Finally, when the character Pedro Navaja is adapted from Blades’ song by a cineaste and playwright, Blades, furious with what others have done with ‘his’ character, decides to resuscitate his eponymous hero killed off at the end of the original song in order to regain the authority of his creation. From theoretical questions including how to read an adaptation or what constitutes an adaptation, this article focuses on the diachronic recurrences of a specific character-type, on the significance of juxtaposing particular historical junctures and on the violence of adaptation and authorship.

Résumé

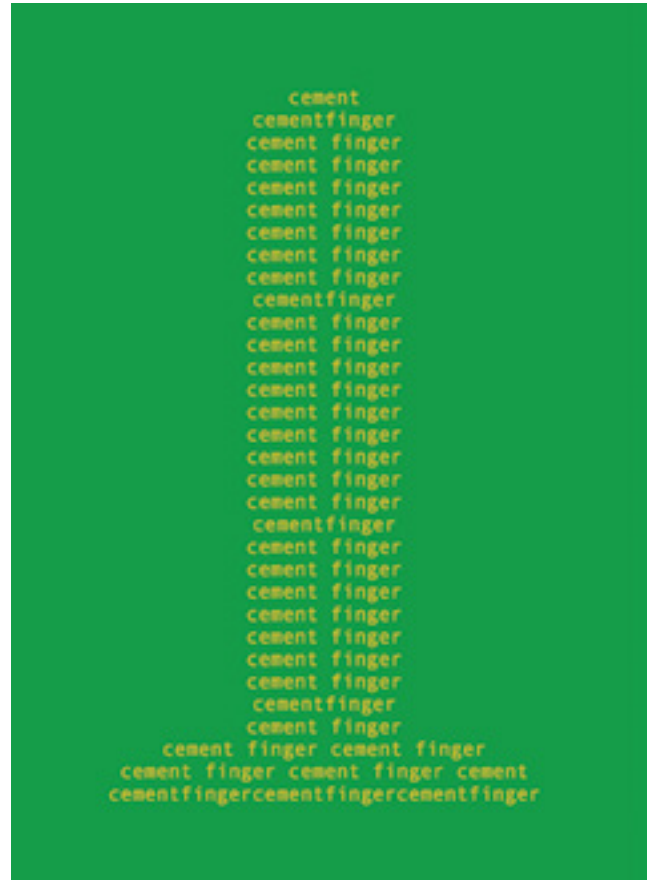
Cet article examine la chanson salsa culte « Pedro Navaja » de l’artiste panaméen Rubén Blades en regard de l’importance de la narration à l’intérieur d’un genre particulier à la danse, et en utilisant la théorie de l’adaptation de Linda Hutcheon et la méthodologie sémiotique brechtienne qui combine le *Gestus* avec les théories du signe. « Pedro Navaja » est une réécriture de la chanson « *Mack the Knife* » (« *Die Moritat von Mackie Messer* »); elle utilise les éléments de la chanson de Kurt Weill pour créer une sorte de mise en abyme. Elle contient aussi des éléments des chansons « *The Beggar’s Opera* » par John Gay et « *The Threepenny Opera* » par Bertolt Brecht. L’article évalue les nombreuses adaptations du bandit de grand chemin, Macheath, suivant son utilisation chez Gay, et examine l’éthique de l’adaptation d’un personnage, d’une histoire ou d’un genre, en même temps qu’il effectue une lecture détaillé de « Pedro Navaja » comme une chanson salsa intellectuelle et narrative. Au bout du compte, Blades décide de ressusciter le protagoniste éponyme qu’il avait tué à la fin de la chanson originale lorsqu’il trouve exaspérant ce que les autres font de Pedro Navaja dans leurs adaptations. Il le fait pour reprendre les droits de propriété sur sa création. Cet article se concentre sur la réapparition diachronique d’un personnage type, sur la signification de la juxtaposition de conjonctures historiques spécifiques, et sur la violence quant à l’adaptation et à la propriété en posant des questions théoriques, y compris celle de ce qui constitue une adaptation, et la question des façons dont celle-ci doit être lue.

Lions, wolves, and vultures don't live together in herds, droves or flocks. Of all animals of prey, man is the only sociable one. Every one of us preys upon his neighbour, and yet we herd together.

John Gay, *The Beggar's Opera*

If human beings are sociable—their antagonistic relationship leading them both to prey and rely upon one another—then the same may be said about the community shaped by authors and texts. Images and ideas travel through the interdependent and interconnected web of semiotic signification, transcending time, space and culture, uniting their diachronic and synchronic manifestations. When dealing with re-writings or adaptations of particular oeuvres, beyond intertextuality or reference, a dialogue forms between the author and context of the hypertext and hypotext¹. This is precisely the case with John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) and its most prized adaptation by Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). The latter, a medley and mix of (at times discordant) musical genres, such as the ballad, proved novel in setting a stepping stone for the fruition of Epic theatre. A particular song bookends the play, a song whose fortune and adaptability has transformed it into a classic, often effacing many of its original connotations: “*Die Moritat von Mackie Messer*,” otherwise known in the English-speaking world as “Mack the Knife” or “The Ballad of Mack the Knife,” via the embellished translation by Mark Blitzstein.² Music and performance, which breach the gaps of textual and lyrical genre, deal with intertextuality on multiple levels, from the acoustic images that stem from the combination of words and quotations of other texts, to the poetics of verse, melody and harmony, to the mimetic and polysemic nature of words and sounds.

By shifting Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* from its position of hypertext to hypotext and in analysing the adaptation of “Mack the Knife” from ballad to salsa, I will seek to reveal the intricate layers of re-writing and analyse how Rubén Blades' “Pedro Navaja” (translated literally as “Peter the Knife,” “Switchblade” or “Pen-knife”) became such a cult song in Hispanic America, by



attempting to forge a notion of community that binds Spanish-speaking countries through a universal narrative. Focusing primarily on the song “Pedro Navaja,” I will consider the shift from ballad to salsa and the relevance of narrating such a genre peculiar to dancing, as well as the binding tissue of the text from a Brechtian semiotic point of view, combining *Gestus* with theories of the sign. After having articulated a definition of ‘adaptation’ and following a history of the fruitful contexts of *The Beggar's Opera* and its re-creations, I will focus on “Pedro Navaja” as text, in hopes of elevating it to one of the many adaptations of Brecht and Gay's works, one that criticism has hitherto left in the dark. Finally, tension surrounding the notion of authorship complicates Blades' authoritative stance, where the author asserts his own authority while adapting from others.

Beyond Gérard Genette and Linda Hutcheon, it is the writing of Harold Bloom that will help illuminate the contradictory relationship between Blades' and both his predecessors and contemporaries.

To Write, or to Re-write, That is the Question

Numerous theorists of semiotics and intertextuality argue that the interconnectedness of texts transcends spatiotemporal boundaries. Such is the case for Gérard Genette who coins the term "transtextuality," a defining concept in revealing a text's poetics, as well as its relationship with other texts. The nomenclature Genette employs relating to transtextuality, particularly his use of "hypertext" and "hypotext" defined above, will serve to differentiate between the shifting textual authority discussed in this essay, taking the place of more charged and problematic terms, such as "original" text or "primary" and "secondary" text. Contrary to his post-structuralist counterparts, the artistic authority for Genette lies mostly within the author, an author capable of creating in conjunction and in dialogue with other works of art, unlike the continuous semiosis of seemingly authorless labyrinthine linguistic permutations, such as those represented in Borges' mythical library. Such a metaphor implies that little or nothing new or authentic is left to say, and that an interconnected world of textuality simply spawns from an architext—the Book *par excellence*—or from a mathematical formula applied to language.

On the opposing spectrum of the effaced role of the author, but in line with the preoccupation with a lack of newness, lies the apprehension at the basis of Harold Bloom's thesis in his seminal work *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*: the weight on an artist's shoulders, whether a poet, novelist or playwright, a weight of the past imbued with an inspiration at times ethereal and supposedly divine, at times mundane, extricated from the society in which these artists flourish and upon which they feed. Finding one's voice or style is often hindered by an overbearing past, by the "Covering Cherub" as Bloom describes it, and what constitutes a great or canonical author or work of art is not only dependent upon the beauty and originality of a verse or

image, but on the influence, whether aesthetic, political or ethical, that work of art produces within a contemporary context and for posterity (38).

These theoretical notions offer a dualistic framework when one asks the relevance—or even the possibility—of stealing, borrowing or adapting a particular image, be it metaphoric or allegorical. I propose that adaptation theory, as discussed by Linda Hutcheon, offers a link between Genette's transtextuality, the notion of interconnected texts in general, and the anxiety described by Bloom. In fact, contrary to Bloom's argument, adapting an oeuvre may be a way to work through such an anxiety, in which the focus is less a question of content than an exposition of form, a discovery of one's singular style. However, this method does come at a price: shifting genres and manipulating form quickly becomes synonymous with violence, not only leading to abounding discussions regarding authorship and intellectual property, but to the destruction of formal and generic boundaries as well, both topics of interest in this paper.

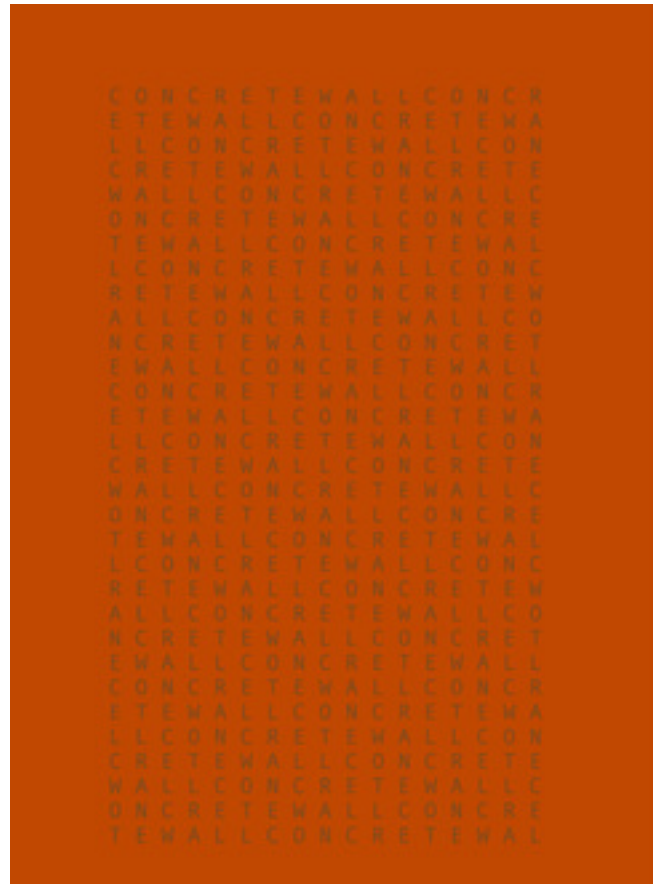
In order to begin answering such questions on the relevance and possibility of stealing images, it is necessary to define the context of adaptation, by asking: what is re-writing and therefore, implicitly, what is re-reading, since thinking in terms of adaptation theory embraces all of these essentials and acutely acknowledges a new teleology for them, by further complicating hermeneutics as a whole.

What is adaptation?

Theories of adaptation scrutinize the notion of the reproducibility of texts and the transformation of stories to say something new, always building on the work of predecessors and an artistic past. Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* evokes the seemingly simplistic truisms, "art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories," and further emphasizing their rhythmic and recurring essence, "storytelling is always the art of repeating stories" (2).³ Beyond the aesthetics of recurring and evolving stories, adaptations also have a socio-historical, as well as cultural *telos*, something acquired and passed down from generations where orality

dominated written culture. For example, Frank Kidson in his study of *The Beggar's Opera* evokes the notion of re-writing and re-creating to remember a past within a collective memory, only one of adaptation's *raison d'être* (12). I would add that such an act embodies a mimetic and creative force: it re-members the past as well, shaping and forming it anew, sculpting a past in relation to the present, whether that relationship be harmonious or antagonistic. This meshing of temporalities is where the imagining of, or even the nostalgia for a past that perhaps never fully existed impregnates the potentiality of the present and therefore of the future as well. This is one facet of myth and story-telling: "the social functions of long-term communal memory," a heritage preserved through time by means of songs, poems, proverbs, all of which run the risk of diversion, of loss and misinterpretation when re-appropriated trans-culturally, repercussions evident, as I will argue, in the case of "Pedro Navaja" (Böker 16). Evidently, adaptation not only emphasizes historical instances of nostalgia and communal memory as Böker suggests, but it offers another point of view regarding a given context, a new aesthetic or generic medium to portray and interpret events. More than simply dialoguing with a context, situation or idea, adaptation also breaks from a mere reconciling of intertextuality on the one hand, and influence on the other, by becoming a literal subgenre where prequels and sequels—or "afterings"—may coexist (*Ibid.*, 16).

There are many ways in which adaptation spawns, across media for example, from novel to film, from song to film, from libretto to the stage, among other forms. This generic travelling mimics the often-anachronistic fusions of diverse temporalities, and questions arise as to why relocate a particular historical juncture in another. What is an author or artist's goal vis-à-vis the hypotext? This last question is important and even crucial to theories of postmodernism, where parody and pastiche are defining characteristics. Should an artist rewrite a play, poem or novel in a satirical manner to achieve his/her own goals, as a parody of content and hierarchy, or as a mockery of form and style in pastiche? And when precisely is the line drawn between parody, pastiche and homage? Hutcheon alludes to this multi-dimensionality of adaptation as follows: "Like parodies, adaptations



have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts, usually revealingly called 'sources'" (4). Unlike parodies, however, adaptations usually openly announce this relationship, often due to the status of the 'original' text. Although it is the "(post-) Romantic valuing of the original creation and of the originating creative genius that is clearly one source of the denigration of adapters and adaptations," it should not go unnoticed that Western Literature has a "history of borrowing," if not blatant plagiarising stories and of "repetition with variation," to explain this economy of redaction in musical terms (4).

One of adaptation's most particular assets, contrary to other genres, is its inherent exegetic orientation. Although, as Hutcheon argues, many adaptations explicitly expose their hypotext or source, this is not the case

for all re-writings, therefore leaving quite a large gap for misinterpretation or “misreading” in Bloom’s sense of the term, should one believe—contrary to the Derridean tenet—that *hors texte* does indeed exist. The *signification* in intertextuality, as Michael Riffaterre and Genette suggest, can only exist once one combines the hypertext and the hypotext, given that—although the adaptation may indeed stand alone—adaptation theory offers a locus of judgement in accordance with its new context, but in line with its paradigmatic counterpart, its axis of selection in Jakobsonian terms. A reader or interpreter unfamiliar with the hypotext may not fully grasp the dialectical representation at hand, its depth and the importance of often minute modifications on behalf of the author of the hypertext. Therefore, reading the hypotext is further complicated by the act of reading its re-writing, while also implicitly reading the adapter’s reading or interpretation of the hypotext, an authentically “palimpsestuous” hermeneutics (Hutcheon 6). I do not wish to imply that an adapted text’s meaning exists solely in conjunction with its hypotext, nor do I suggest that an adaptation’s intertextual references be completely expounded or necessarily divulged to fully comprehend a text; however, for the specific example of “Pedro Navaja,” I am offering a reading of the most overt hypotexts and intertexts, those of Gay and Brecht.

Texts and Contexts

In an attempt to avoid overly theorizing a subject which has already received much attention, it is in light of the guiding remarks on adaptation theory above, with a combination of Brechtian semiotics, that I will explore “Pedro Navaja,” one of the many adaptations of a text that withholds a metaphorically polysemic value: it is a text imbued with a universality that has seen an excess of transformations and re-writings.⁴

The adaptability of *The Beggar’s Opera*

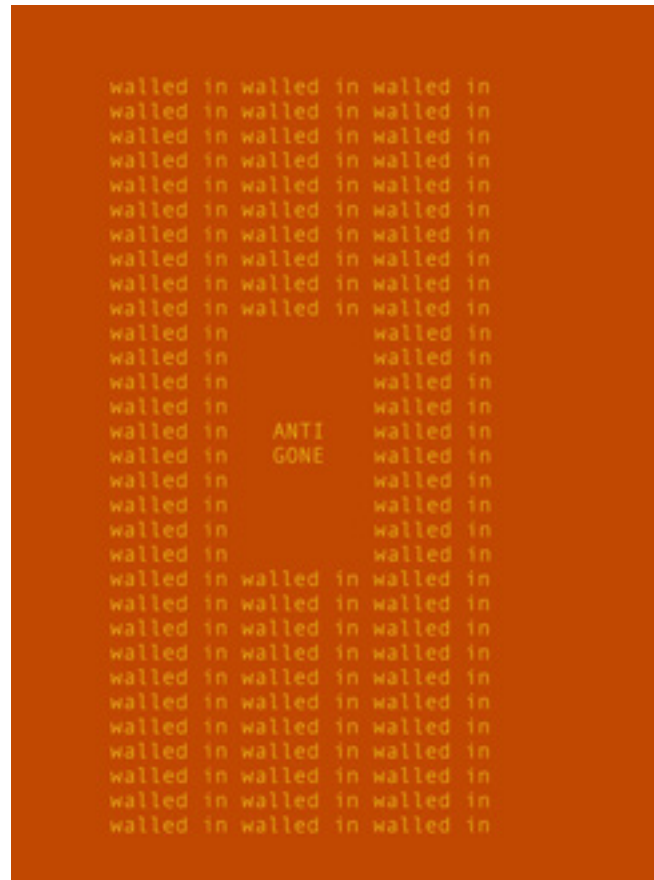
An obvious and yet crucial question arises when dealing with a text that has seen such prodigal textual progenies: what constitutes the fertile adaptability of John Gay’s *The Beggar’s Opera*? What seems most obvious is its generic hybridity, a form that encompasses a multitude of songs, choruses and theatres, detaching itself

from the mono-generic form of Italian, French and German opera of which it is a critique. Interestingly, according to Uwe Böker, its form proved detrimental to the play’s initial staging: “the Drury Lane Theatre was reluctant to put on this new kind of stage entertainment which included songs, popular arias and marches from the *opera seria* and other types of music” (9). The particular socio-economic context is also telling; it is the first time “conspicuous consumption” comes into being, exemplary of a nascent consumer society in formation and thus of further differentiations regarding the division of labour and class (*Ibid.*, 9). This new society and the latent reproducibility of art as a means of capital become inextricably related. Therefore, upon overcoming the hurdles of the difficult first staging, the innovative form and genre of *The Beggar’s Opera*, already polyvalent and hybrid alone, began to lend itself to a multiplicity of interpretations and re-orchestrations due to its schizophrenic nature. Böker continues, explaining the fascination that finally overtook the London scene: “Many a Grub Street dramatist was therefore tempted to imitate a commercially successful play like *The Beggar’s Opera*,” making it the model of a virtual plethora of “ballad opera” adaptations, such as *The Cobbler’s Opera*, *The Lover’s Opera* and *The Statesman’s Opera*, *Harlequin’s Opera*, to name a few (10-11). The vast majority of these adaptations share a unique and linear plot line: the children rebel against parents over marriage, accentuating the dichotomies of the authority of parents and the adventurous nature of youth, along with the stereotypical antithesis of “country innocence and London corruption” (12).

The depiction of London as “corrupt, putrid and anarchic to the point of insanity” is a socio-political recurrence that could effortlessly define many cities and nations throughout history, and it is therefore not surprising that Brecht would use such a fruitful and universal context to criticize the atrocities of capitalism, since, for Brecht and Gay, the most important element in art was to paint a picture of contemporary society capable of creating an awareness of the problems within the societal strands that thread a nation together, similar to the interwoven qualities of a text (Dabydeen 31). Brecht’s

primary interest in Epic theatre was to force an acute awareness on the spectator's behalf of the fictionality of representation, stripping the performance of its realism or armature, and foregrounding its transparency, excluding any possibility of the Aristotelian catharsis Brecht refused. In fact, Walter Benjamin writes that Brecht's "effort to make the audience interested in the theatre as experts—not at all for cultural reasons—is an expression of his political purpose" (1973, 16). This acknowledgement of *ideas* being played out instead of a dressed-up replica of reality provokes a parallel between the actions and ideas represented on stage, the manner in which they figure artistically and politically, and the real-life experiences of the audience members: a temporal coexistence that unite artist and viewer. Not dissimilar in nature to the DJ or the band's inciting power to stimulate communal action on a dance floor, one of Brecht's goals was to transform the paralysed, passive or "relaxed" audience, to use Benjamin and Brecht's terms, into an active and aware mass of individuals caught in a socio-political situation demanding attention: the feverish nineteen-twenties inhabited by the so-called "hopeless generation" (Böker 20).

Many international and transcultural "updatings" of *The Beggar's Opera*, to use Böker's temporally transcendental expression, follow similar patterns of equating socio-political unrest to a distant past's environment, the most famous being Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. Following Brecht, one may add Vaclav Havel's *Zebracka opera* (1975), Wole Soyinka's *Opera Wonyosi* (1977), Chico Buarque de Hollandas *Opera do Malandro* (1978), Purnushottam Laxman Deshpande's *Teen Paishyacha Tamasba*, (1978), Dario Fo's *L'opera dello sghignazzo* (1981), Alan Ayckbourn's *A Chorus of Disapproval* (1984), Nick Dear and Stephen Warbeck's *The Villain's Opera* (2000), Dale Wasserman's *The Beggar's Holiday* (2004) and Robert Lepage's *The Busker's Opera* (2004). The enormous adaptability of *The Beggar's Opera* is evident in such a long list of re-writings and its conduciveness to globalization and internationality is equally manifest. Not only diachronically related, these texts share something specific in their production: these authors "went back to Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in order to point out



political, social and cultural parallels to the present in an oblique way" (Böker 19). This "oblique" manner of both encompassing and surpassing time evokes notions of Brechtian theatrical practices, not to mention one of its defining elements: the theatre is diametrical. Opposing times, political ideologies and regimes, the private and the public sphere in an ambivalent cohesion—almost oxymoronically—allows for a standstill that demands recognition, one that (re)visits the lost and silenced micro-narratives, the refuse of history.

One example of the function of awareness within such a diametrical staging is Brecht's transformation of *The Threepenny Opera's* ending. By breaking the "fourth wall" and telling the audience that instead of hanging Macheath—already on the platform to be hanged—that

they would spare his life, they analogously equate him to Queen Victoria. Peter Ferran in his article “The *Three-penny* Songs: Cabaret and the Lyrical *Gestus*” explains: “Indeed, his impending execution competes for [the spectators’] enjoyment with another spectacular event of equal fascination—the pageant of Queen Victoria’s coronation. The criminal’s fictional elevation (speaking of hanging) is matched against the Queen’s historical ascent to the throne – and both events are presented *as popular theatrical entertainment*” (Ferran 8). This is a specific example of Brecht’s dialectical theatre which forces the audience to see both historical events congruently and as operating according to a similar paradigm, a *Gestus* that performs a historicizing impulse.

Knives and Blades

Functioning according to a similar paradigmatic orchestration, Rubén Blades writes the song “Pedro Navaja”—the “beautiful and terrible story of Pedro Navaja” that Gabriel García Márquez states he wished he had written⁵--the telling of two simultaneous stories that meet each other half way: the first, that of a neighbourhood thief Pedro Barrio known as Pedro Navaja, a specular representation of Macheath and a likening to the picaresque *Compadrito* figure in the Tango, whose attributes⁶ are his long pockets in which he conceals his knife, his gold tooth that lights his path in the dark night and his hat, slightly slanted as not to show his face. An anonymous woman of the streets is lamenting the fact that she has not made any *pesos* that evening and is wondering what she is going to eat. Pedro Navaja, born to prey on the weak, approaches her in an attempt to rob her, pulls out his knife and stabs her, while she pulls out a “Smith and Wesson” and shoots him dead. A drunkard walking by picks up the two pesos, the knife, the gun and leaves.

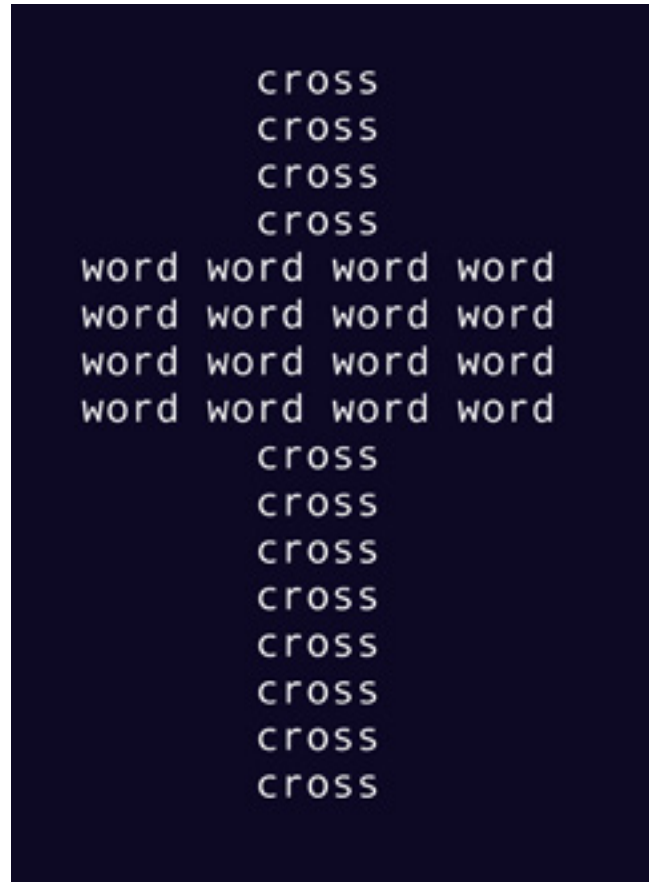
The author, Rubén Blades Bellido de Luna, whose providential Anglophone last name⁷ proves genuine, is a Panamanian singer songwriter, actor, lawyer and politician. It is of no surprise that such a politically invested individual who narrates the hardships of the poor in Latin America, as well as critiquing the “plastic” nature of the rich “who sweat Chanel No. 3,” be interested in

Brecht’s representation of Gay’s play (Blades & Colon in “*Plástico*”). Aesthetically much in line with Brecht and Weill’s orchestrations and concerns with generic hybridity, Blades is a forerunner in bringing experimental tempos to traditional Latin-American music, fusing Cuban beats with Nuyorican forms,⁸ as well as promoting what he calls, in reference to Salsa, “a thinking person’s dance music,” in other words politically and ideologically invested,⁹ since salsa was hitherto reduced to a sort of pastoral romance, describing the beauty of a country’s landscape or one’s infatuation with a certain individual. In combining art and awareness beyond passive and lethargic entertainment, Blades believes that even salsa music may become a genre conducive to physical *engagement* through dancing and listening, participating in the same “transparent” context alluded to by Brecht and thus uniting author or performer, and spectator. Whereas Brecht’s goal was to incite awareness of the thematic and ideological discordance as to provoke action, for Blades, the action ideally and metonymically shifts from a physical movement of masses dancing communally to individual consciousness and intellectual stimulation, creating awareness for that which is behind the beats and dance steps. Blades’ goal, therefore, is to popularize “narrative salsa,” in which a whole story can be told in a song, since, according to the artist, “you can respect your conscience and the *clave* rhythm in the same song.”¹⁰

Beyond Brecht, Blades’ indebtedness to the existentialists, namely Camus, nurtures the narrative role of the single action, absurd as it may be, that defines a given character in a particular context. Similarly, his interest in “*tremendista*” novels spawns from the importance of having characters in his songs that are victims of society.¹¹ Since fate decides all in such generic representations, even if the characters are grotesquely described monsters amidst the seedy underbelly of the city, or on the treacherous streets, one almost takes pity on them despite their thievery. For Blades, having grown up in a middle-class family, yet surrounded by the slums, the laws of the street mesh with those of the stage, life on the streets being a central theme in *The Beggar’s Opera* and *The Threepenny Opera*. It is interesting to note that “The Ballad of Mack the Knife” is originally entitled

“*Die Moritat von Mackie Messer*,” with *Moritat* etymologically meaning deadly deed, a medieval murder ballad performed in the streets by strolling minstrels.

Towards a Semiotics of Salsa: Pedro Navaja and *Gestus*
 “Pedro Navaja” does not follow the linear story line of children rebelling against their parents due to a forced or forbidden marriage. Nonetheless, Blades combines childhood and the streets both thematically and linguistically from the very beginning of the song. He breaks the fourth wall that divides performers and public with the first words that serve as an incipit, words that precisely only belong to the oral tradition and therefore never transcribed in the lyrics: “*Avelino, ven acà!*” Avelino, an unknown character, is representative—particularly through the use of the diminutive—of the surrounding youngsters, either those present around the stage during the song’s performance or the youth of Latin America called together in harmony. In “Pedro Navaja,” the audience and the dancers are called over to hear something new, a story never before told in this genre, since, until the 1970s, salsa had little ideological value. This story is a tale with a serious moral message combined with popular dancing, the Brechtian dialectic evocative from the get-go. Although it is unknown whether or not Blades explicitly studied Brechtian thought, the similar use of a dialectical stance, as well as the thematic content which permeates through *The Threepenny Opera* into “Pedro Navaja” does indeed suggest Blades scrupulously examined Brecht’s play. Ferran, in regards to Brecht’s work, describes this dialectic as follows: “The point for Brecht and Weill was to use music for social criticism, to seek *its* expressive possibilities, and indeed to do so by (among other things) preserving its very “narcotic charms” to some degree but also by joining it to a context which contradicted them, which should have enforced a consciousness of their enrapturing effect: the contradiction between action and music was thematized and demonstrated, and the exhibition of epic forms was to contribute above all to this” (6). Ironically, Brecht’s public would fail to acknowledge this rupture: the dialectical contradiction capable of soliciting introspection, and sadly, the success of the opera relies on the failure of this technique (6). For Blades, however, the hurdle between serious lyrics and popular dancing was



not insurmountable, and Blades succeeds where Brecht fails mostly due to the physical *engagement*, the performative responsibility vested in the listener-turned-dancer or dancer-turned-listener. The locus of performance for both Brecht and Blades also offers intriguing parallels. Lisa Appignanesi, in her studies on the cabaret (a context and genre dear to Brecht) demonstrates to what extent it shares in intimacy and performance with the context of a popular salsa stage:

What remains more or less consistent in cabaret, and allows it to be defined as a distinct form, are its structural elements: a small stage and smallish audience and an ambience of talk and smoke, where the relationships between performer and spectator is one at once of intimacy and hostil-

ity, the nodal points of participation and provocation. The cabaret performer plays directly to his audience, breaking down the illusory fourth wall of traditional theater. There is never any pretence made of an identity existing between actor and role. Rather, [...] the performer remains a performer, no matter what he is enacting (Ferran 6).

The explicitly allegorical enactment of ideas instead of reality is similar to forms of Epic theatre, which both Brecht and Blades espouse. In reference to salsa specifically, more often than not in a popular setting, the salsa stage is also small, performers and singers directly address the audience, in a hospitable context always verging on the hostile, a context which sets a tone of *hospitality* to use one of Derrida's neologisms. Such a term implies the potential destruction of the subject in the face of otherness—whether the other be outside or within the self—and the eventual possibility of accepting a new ideological position which may clash with one's preconceived standpoint.

The setting of "Pedro Navaja" is a sidewalk on a corner street, a literal crossways and metaphor of interweaving and meeting, as well as circulation, with all of its accompanying connotations of wealth and sex. It is also a *topos* of crime settings, lending both universality and particularity to the context, since it also links it intertextually with Mack "On the sidewalk, Sunday morning." The protagonist, still unnamed, walks "*con el tumbao que tienen los guapos al caminar.*" *Tumbao* is slang for swagger, style and class, and yet it connotes someone also capable of moving swiftly and with agility. This initial description of his attributes, when read alongside Brecht's definition of *Gestus*, unveils the minute construction of Pedro Navaja's character: "Brecht's Latinate coinage refers to the domain of human behavior exhibiting social relationships through individual attitude, stance, or posture. However abstract, the meaning of *Gestus* contains these essentials: social behavior, attitudinal perspective; demonstrative enactment. The core of the sense of *Gestus* is the notion of *point of view*, understood both as a component of human social interaction and as a feature of theatrical representations of such interaction" (Ferran 7). Although not yet interact-

ing with any characters, Pedro's description is primordial to the definition of his character and what he stands for, his gestures imbued with social importance. A quick glance at the first and second stanzas—entirely descriptions of the anti-hero—suffice to understand his thieving strategies and the use of his props:

[...]
*las manos siempre en los bolsillos de su gabán
 pa' que no sepan en cuál de ellas lleva el puñal.*

*Usa un sombrero de ala ancha de medio lao'
 y zapatillas por si hay problemas salir volao',
 lentes oscuros pa' que no sepan que está mirando*

y un diente de oro que cuando rie se ve brillando.

[...]
 his hands always deep inside the pockets of his coat
 so that nobody knows which one holds the dagger

he uses a wide brim hat, tilted to one side
 sporting sneakers, to fly when in danger
 dark shades so nobody knows what he's looking at
 and a golden tooth that shines when he laughs

The golden tooth also lights his way when fleeing; his sneakers are "*zapatillas*," further accentuating, from a linguistic standpoint, the diminutive's power throughout the song; the seemingly small and unnoticed are those who are, in fact, eating away at society from the ground up.

Meanwhile, three blocks away, the portrait of a prostitute is painted: a woman

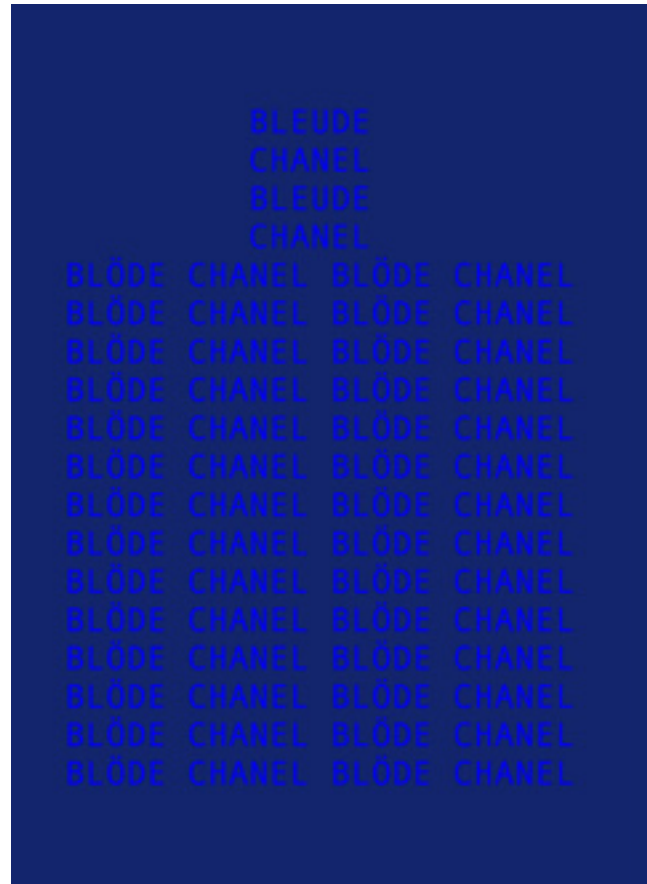
*va recorriendo la acera entera por quinta vez,
 y en un zaguán entra y se da un trago para olvidar
 que el día está flojo y no hay clientes pa' trabajar.*

strides the whole curb for the fifth time
 and inside a store she goes to have a drink and
 forget

that the day moves slow, and she has no customers to attend

Pertaining to the lexical field of movement, the listener can extrapolate a matrix of speed and slickness beginning with the *tumbao* of Pedro Navaja. The following verses also adhere to this isotopic web and mirror the prostitute’s quotidian idleness: “*Un carro pasa muy despacito por la avenida / No tiene marcas pero to’os saben qu’es policia.*”¹² Similar to the thief catcher Peachum in *The Beggar’s Opera* who has everyone else do his dirty work for him—a parodic symbol of societal peace—the police in “Pedro Navaja” appear in a ghost-car that everyone knows exists. One can only assume that, reciprocally, the police also know who the gangsters are—much like Peachum in Gay’s work—despite their inability to stop them. In accordance with Hutcheon’s adaptation theory, reading these verses in line with Brecht’s play, and the police alongside Peachum, would suggest that the police have something to gain from Pedro’s thievery, an impossible observation without reference to the hypotext. Furthermore, it recalls the original context that led Gay to write his play: the infamous Jonathan Wild as a duplicitous gangster and policeman in London. Gaining the public’s trust and seemingly protecting them, he and his gang in turn robbed the people, later returning some or all of their goods (and receiving a reward for it), while framing and imprisoning rival gang members for the looting. Such government sanctioned thievery, when transposed anachronistically into “Pedro Navaja,” offers a particular commentary on authority, policing, as well as on public and private property.

Pedro Navaja sees the car and, with his hands in his pockets, crosses the street “running, silently,” while the woman is on the other side of the street, moving a gun from her coat to her purse, “*Un .38 Smith & Wesson del especial / Que carga encima pa’ que la libre de todo mal.*”¹³ It may seem odd to hear a mixing of registers, from slang to poetic verse and now to the discourse of prayers, more specifically the Lord’s Prayer, which ends “and deliver us from evil.” Blades’ poetics, however, transpire throughout the text and all verses are undoubtedly minutely constructed. This verse transports the listener to the beginning of the song, where one hears the



acoustic image “Ave” in the name Avelino, *Ave* also pertaining to Biblical and prayer discourse, as in “Ave Maria,” perhaps the most common Latin American name for a (Christian) woman. The orchestrations of a secular prayer with a story concerning thievery emanates, a strand of the semiotic web to which I will return.

The narrative continues, reaching its violent climax: Pedro Navaja crosses the street and stabs the woman, his “golden tooth shining [across] the whole avenue,” while she pulls out a weapon of her own, and all of a sudden spectators hear that “a gunshot bursted out like a cannon...”

*Y Pedro Navaja cayó en la acera mientras veía, a esa mujer,
Que revolver en mano y de muerte herida a el le decía:
“Yo que pensaba ‘hoy no es mi día estoy sala’,
Pero Pedro Navaja tu estás peor, no estás en na’*

and Pedro Navaja, fell on the curb as he saw the woman with the gun in her hand, and mortally wounded telling him: “I thought: today was not my day, I’m on a bad streak. But Pedro Navaja, you’re worse: you’re worthless”

The physical *Gestus* of the characters, that is “how the character’s stance toward someone or something impels and defines his behaviour toward that person or thing,” is particularly telling (Ferran 7). Here, despite the stance of these two characters—Pedro Navaja lying on top of the stabbed prostitute—there is no place for rape, no place for the authoritative paterfamilias, dictator or police to rob or pimp the public and the poor. The rebelling individual and the muted community, however, stand in opposition to each other. Despite the noise, no one leaves their homes to see what has happened or ask any questions; instead, a sort of mob-like *omertà* or law of silence reigns. Only a drunkard, who stumbles over the two bodies, takes “the gun, the dagger, the money” and off he goes. While leaving, however, he starts to sing a tune: “Life brings you surprises, surprises are brought by life, O God!” The rhetorical chiasmus embodies a syntactic mirror and the image of circulation or of literal revolution becomes manifest: life reflecting surprises, surprises life. It sets up a larger paradigmatic reading of the mirroring of misery.

Pedro Navaja as paradigm, is a rogue, dictator, emblem of political power now powerless, and beneath him lies a woman, the embodiment of feminine submissiveness, a prostitute, “seller and sold in one,” who, sick of not making enough money to eat, rebels against the authority (Benjamin 10). Blades takes on a feminist point of view, figuratively placing sexual assault and one woman’s revolt against violence, rape and the phallic knife,

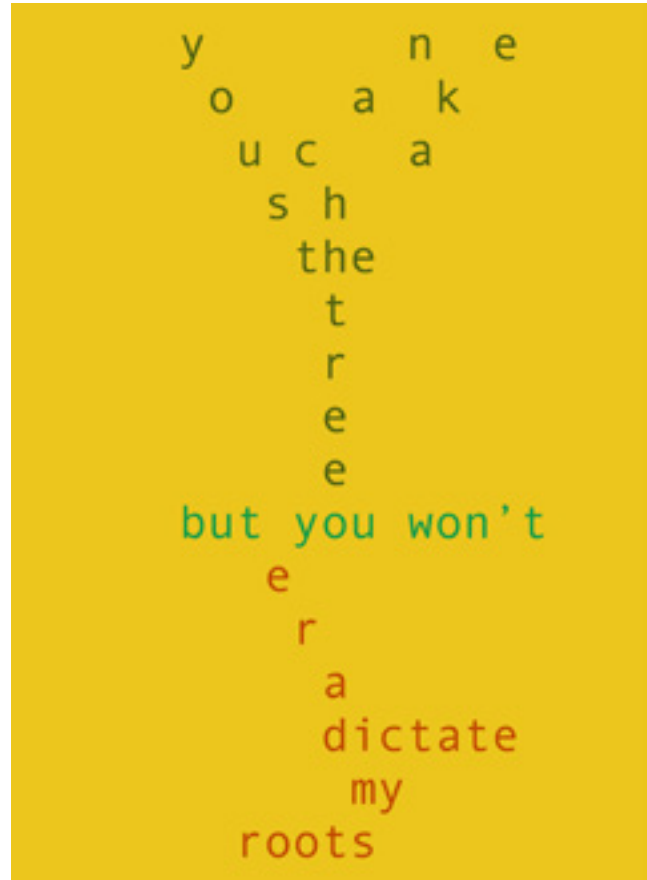
as a stand in for the violence and oppression against which communities need to stand up, opposing the cruelty of individuals and political regimes. As to further demonstrate the hardships of his nation, such a point of view nurtures Blades’ transformation of the archetypal plot sequence from Gay’s play. Whereas the plot structure of rebelling against the father to marry a highwayman laid the basis for *The Beggar’s Opera* and *The Threepenny Opera*, here the paradigm is more symbolic, and the paternal authority is mostly political: the economic exchange of marriage is now abject and debased to prostitution. Although only a song, “Pedro Navaja” contains as a sort of *mise-en-abîme* or text within a text, the textual macrocosm within the microcosm; it folds within itself the numerous adaptations of *The Beggar’s Opera* into one song, a song that reflects the struggles of many Latin American countries—much like the “*focolorization*”¹⁴ to which alludes Chico Buarque de Hollanda in his adaptation—a song that unites a people, forcing them to hear the stories while physically engaging with them through dance, even if the dancing and the story are in contradiction to one another.

The secular prayer

Following the story-line and the chorus repeated by the drunkard—*la vida te da sorpresas, sorpresas te da la vida, ay Dios*—Rubén Blades breaks off into spontaneous and proverbial *pregones* or *soneos*, forms that hark back to improvised street concerts, whose origins go back to Flamenco music.¹⁵ The streets represent the locus of performance, but they are also deeply enmeshed in the message of the song. Pedro Navaja’s true name is Pedro Barrio, the patronymic meaning neighborhood or in this case, the slums. Songs that speak of the interior of the city, according to Blades, are fantastic, almost mythical, and he states that every one of his protagonists once walked the streets of his *barrio* in Panama City. Once, when asked in an interview, “When you imagine these stories, these characters do you see them on the street, realistically, or on a stage?” he responded, “I see them as if a street were a stage.”¹⁶ In his response, Blades seems to align himself with Brecht regarding the aesthetics and locus of performance, as shown in Brecht’s theorizing in the *Threepenny Trial* and his play *The Streets*. As-

trid Oesmann in *Staging History*, explains: “In response to the social and economic structures of the bourgeois culture in which he finds himself, Brecht locates theatre as social action occurring not within the cultural superstructure, but in society’s base—meaning the street, the place where public life is at its most direct and physical” (111). For Blades, the streets represent precisely the unifying potential of Hispanic countries in understanding such universal narratives, but they are also what link the highwayman Macheath to the genres of the cabaret, the *Moritat*—which harks back to traveling minstrels—and flamenco *soneos*. Here, the term *soneo* or *pregon* has come to represent improvised verses, based on the form of the proverb.

The *pregones* are interspersed between the chorus, the first one being a direct reference to Mackie Messer: “*Maleante pescador, el anzuelo que tiraste, en vez de una sardina, un tiburón enganchaste.*”¹⁷ The shark recalls the verses made famous by Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, among others: “Oh, the shark has pretty teeth, dear/ And he shows ‘em pearly whites” and, as suggested above, Pedro’s glowing teeth in turn take on symbolic value, their metaphoric worth as ‘golden’ and their relevance to the plot as one of Pedro’s quotable gestures, in their ability to light up the street. Böker notes that “[c]ritics used to remark that Bertolt Brecht’s Mackie Messer bears little resemblance to Gay’s Macheath, the Weill-Brechtian counterpart being presented as a tough gangster and a “businessman,” the smile of the shark being based on George Grosz’s 1921 drawing of Berlin brothels called *Haifische* (“sharks”)” (20). I would argue that Pedro Navaja is indeed part of the same lineage and the hypertext traces closer to Brecht’s text than to Gay’s for Blades. Similarly, the Panamanian artist was also deeply influenced by Kafka’s stories, as he explicitly states in the following *pregon* in “Pedro Navaja”: “*Como en una novela de Kafka, el borracho se dobló por el callejón.*”¹⁸ Running takes on a symbolic attribute in the streets, picking up from the early mentioning of Pedro’s *zapatillas* previously discussed. Elsewhere in the song, the audience is warned of those who do not run: “*En barrio de guapos cuida’o en la acera, cuida’o camara’ / El que no corre vuela,*” describing the thieves



in super-human and even animalistic terms.¹⁹ Aparna Dharwadker argues that there exists a “dehumanizing effect of the pursuit of money and power” on behalf of the Macheath-like characters, which I believe—at least in “Pedro Navaja”—is similar in a way to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*, an explicit reference made by Blades to represent the dehumanizing and alienating nature of society vis-à-vis the less fortunate (13). Here, only the marginalized characters in the city, the grotesquely dehumanized, degraded and animalesque individuals, such as the drunkards, seem able to survive in such a mendacious environment.

The adaptability of “Pedro Navaja”

The conniving microcosm of Blades’ streets interest-

ingly mirrors the thieving world of authorship and artistic creativity. If Macheath in *The Beggar's Opera* has a semiotic potential of reproducibility, then the destiny of Pedro Navaja as figure and image will prove quite similar. The once highwayman Macheath become street thief Pedro—without recounting the numerous evolutions between these two states of being—will further evolve to develop into the protagonist of a movie, *El hijo de Pedro Navaja* (*The Son of Pedro Navaja*) by Alfonso Priego Jr. and a musical entitled *La verdadera historia de Pedro Navaja* (*The True Story of Pedro Navaja*) by a Puerto Rican company, but credited to Pablo Cabrera. Rubén Blades, furious with Cabrera for what he did to 'his' character, not to mention the film adaptations, decides to resuscitate him and writes the song "Sorpresas" ("Surprises"). This is a literal sequel or aftering of "Pedro Navaja," which opens with the drunk—spokesman leading the chorus and message of the previous song—who had picked up the loot leftover after the reciprocal killing and who, in turn, is held up at gunpoint and robbed. This further complicates the notion of "showing the mirroring device of drawing parallels between "Common Robbers" and the "Robbers of the Publick,"" a fundamental analogy for understanding *The Beggar's Opera*, since both Gay and Blades turn thievery into a vertiginous never-ending cycle and blur the boundaries between individuals robbing each other, and the "Publick" robbing the people (Böker 19). When asked where he found a gun and a knife, he tells the thief (a personification of Cabrera), the story of Pedro Navaja and the prostitute. The robber, out of curiosity, goes to the scene of the murder and kicks the dead bodies to make sure they are truly dead, and to everyone's surprise, Pedro Navaja (who, given his name, always has an extra blade on him) stands up and kills the new thief, leaves his ID in the deceased's back pocket and leaves. We also learn over the radio in the background that the dead prostitute in question is really a man dressed as a woman. Theoretical and ethical questions abound in regards to adaptation, combining gender performativity, authorship and authority. Whether Blades' re-appropriation of 'his' character seems unscrupulous or not, and whether egoistically prolonging his creation for artistic or commercial interest, the position of the artist on the market-

place and the artist's *auctoritas*²⁰ in general are put into question, to the point where one may ask: is it possible to perform authorship and if so, what are its benefits?

Brecht, following *The Threepenny Opera's* success, agreed to write the screenplay for a movie bearing the same title, a relationship with Nero Film AG that would quickly disintegrate. Unhappy that the producers had deviated so much from his script, itself a deviation from his theatrical script, he decided to sue the producers. The reciprocal accusations of one or the other having strayed away too far from his original intentions is precisely what frames *The Threepenny Trial*, later acknowledged by the defeated Brecht as performance art, in which the lawyers, judge and all present, were actors in "his" play, a play that explicitly demonstrated the abuse of artistic rights, trampled time and again by large businesses and capitalism. Whether or not Brecht should legitimately feel that his text was misappropriated remains an ambivalent topic within Brechtian criticism. I suggest that the nuance lies within a question of genre and media. Adaptation, to truly merit its nomenclature, needs to update and re-contextualize a given story or aesthetic representation, while dialoguing both with the present and the past on which it inevitably calls. Brecht's primary re-workings of the theatrical script nurtured a more overtly political text that his producer, Seymour Nebenzahl deemed unfit, not wanting to tamper with a proven moneymaking spectacle. Finally, the specific shift from theatre to the screen is a violent one in the case of both Brecht's and Blades' works. The trans-mediatic move places the performance in a much more exploitable commercial medium, in which the once susceptible form of the theatre performance is reduced to an infinitely reproducible single show, effacing the communal feel to viewing the play in a theatre, a play with room for error, street-like improvisation and interaction with its audience. In film, no room is left for such artistic license, elements at the very heart of Epic theatre. The producer chooses the single point of view of the camera for the viewer, and the spectator no longer actively participates in the creation of the play, or in the realization of its goals.

Rubén Blades, as his name suggests, is working through and against such violence, in an attempt to reclaim the power invested in the art of performing, be it a song or a whole play, beyond film or previously recorded musicals. Precisely this ever-so-changing quality of what takes place on stage becomes Blades' strategic critique. It seems that in resuscitating characters, the author would be performing a literal form of prosopopoeia, also keeping in tradition with Epic theatre in which ideas are performed, abstractions therefore taking on the embodiment of a miasma of signs. An intriguing shift takes place from a semiotic and allegorical point of view. Whereas Pedro Navaja embodied thievery and the destructive nature of authority and even dictatorship imposed upon a paralyzed nation, due to Blades' disgust for what Cabrera has done with *his* creation, the act of resuscitating Pedro transforms him from a negative image to a positively manipulated figure. He now embodies intellectual property and, ironically, the positive authority of the author-performer, who—similar to Pedro Navaja himself—had long been proclaimed dead, at least since Roland Barthes.

Conclusion

If human beings are animals of prey as Gay suggests, then the social injustices of hierarchical abuse, of corruption and thirst for power, create an interconnected dialogue among many countries and regions that have suffered under dictatorships and political regimes. By adopting similar performance concepts to those of Brecht, and in combining a narrativized cerebral salsa with popular music and dance steps, Blades goes beyond a critical karaoke or ventriloquist regurgitation of what has already been said and overstated. In fact, he builds yet another layer to the societal inequalities foraged by Gay and Brecht, by depicting women as both the victims and means of salvation, adopting a feminist point of view that goes beyond simply labelling the woman as victim. She is an emblem of the country, a martyr suffering to feed herself and perhaps her children in a nation where the only pecuniary circulation is on the corner of a street. Blades' goal is not only to bring salsa back to its roots, but also to push it beyond superficial language devoid of any stimulating power and meaning, whether

political, ideological or spiritual. What remains unanswered, however, is where the line may be drawn between the prized hypotext and the hypertext, its transformed, stolen and re-contextualized counterpart. That Blades would have been furious with other artists for adapting a character that was never fully his to begin with merits further analysis. Nonetheless, in an attempt to further understand the breadth of adaptable power in Gay's work—one can only imagine how he might feel about the adaptability of his play—it would be fruitful to shift the readings and analyses from a diachronic reading, as I have done, to a synchronic one, including Alfonso Priego Jr.'s and Cabrera's orchestrations, since "multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically," allowing for a dialogue to establish between those artists who chose *The Beggar's Opera* and *The Threepenny Opera* either as a parodic means to critique a specific historical context, or to pay homage to a pioneering text (Hutcheon xiii).

Notes

1. According to Gérard Genette and his theories on transtextuality, or the "textual transcendence of text," the hypotext is the basis upon which the hypertext exists: in this case, "Pedro Navaja" is the hypertext and *The Beggar's Opera*, *The Threepenny Opera* and more specifically the song "Mack the Knife," are its hypotexts (9).

2. The study at hand will examine Blades' song in relation to the English version of "Mack the Knife." Due to length, the question of translation – specifically, reading Brecht in German or in English – will not be addressed in this essay.

3. This quotation is Linda Hutcheon's echoing of Walter Benjamin.

4. It seems appropriate to analyse a text from the same point of view that nurtured its existence. This is to say that Rubén Blades was aware of Brechtian theory and it would have therefore explicitly nurtured his own creations.

5. Frank Figueroa: <http://www.maestravida.com/characters.html>

6. The term “attribute” is relative to Peircean semiotics. For Peirce, “icons,” a specific form of the sign, are defined according to their attributes. In hagiography, for example, religious icons are recognized thanks to certain objects and attributes peculiar to them, an initial form of educating the illiterate in the realm of the religious. Peircean “attributes,” although more props than actions, are not completely unlike Brecht’s “quotable gestures.” In fact, such an analogy merits a closer look at Brechtian *Gestus* alongside Peircean semiotics.

7. The paternal last name, that is.

8. A hybrid form of New York and Puerto Rican influences.

9. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/music/artists/f050673a-dfb3-4200-b057-bf78213de36c>

10. Frank Figueroa: <http://www.maestravida.com/characters.html>

The clave rhythm is a five stroke rhythm, omnipresent in Afro-Cuban music and represents the guiding beat in all salsa songs.

11. *Tremendista* novels participate in a 1940s movement where the plot violently describes the hyperbolically dismembered, psychologically distraught and abused characters, all societal remnants of a post-war nation.

12. “A car moves slowly through the avenue / it has no marks but everyone knows it’s the police.”

13. “A .38 special “Smith & Wesson”/ that she keeps always, to rid her from all evil.”

14. De Hollanda bases his neologism on a hybridized Portuguese and English word, combining the Portuguese “folklore” with an English suffix.

15. The etymology of *pregon* is “prayer.”

16. Frank Figueroa: <http://www.maestravida.com/characters.html>

17. Translation: “Delinquent fisherman, by throwing a hook in the water, instead of a sardine, you caught a shark.” My translation.

18. “As in a Kafka novel, the drunkard turned the corner and ran” (My translation).

19. “Ghetto of thugs, be careful on the curb, take care my buddy, he who does not run, flies...”

20. The use of *auctoritas* in Latin is twofold. It refers to a particular prestige and influence an individual had in Roman society. Also, etymologically, it recalls that “author” comes from “to augment” (as theorized by linguist Émile Benveniste), thus adding yet another layer to the notion of adaptability, authorship and ownership of a particular text or creation. The term pushes the ambiguities of adaptation further, given that, to increase or add on, is not qualitative, but quantitative.

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