The Puerto Rican Lower East Side and the Queer Underground

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By now we do not lack studies that place the 1960s underground within the history of queer culture—as a revival of 1910s and 1920s Greenwich Village bohemianism, a time of growing visibility after the closeted 1940s and 1950s, or a foundational period for subsequent queer art and life—but we still have to examine how this particular moment intersects with a number of ethnic cultures, particularly with Latino cultures. The connection is elusive but deserves to be examined. After all, the period of latency and development of the New York underground, roughly from 1950 to 1968, coincides with the large-scale Latinization of New York City under the influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants from the Caribbean, an influx prompted by the U.S. postwar industrial expansion and political interventionism in the area. Between World War II and 1970, the number of Latinos in the city grew from 150,000 to over a million—about ten percent of the population. The number of Cubans doubled, from 42,000 to 82,000; the number of Dominicans more than quintupled, from 13,000 to 70,000; and the number of Puerto Ricans increased from 70,000 in 1945 to well over 800,000 in 1970. Spanish Caribbeans initially concentrated in the area called El Barrio, the East Harlem section between 103rd and 125th Streets to the east of Park Avenue, and they later made inroads into the South Bronx, the Upper West Side, the East Village, and the Lower East Side. Downtown, the largest settlement was in Alphabet City, renamed Louisaída in the 1970s, but Latinos could also be found—can still be found—south of Houston, on the historic Lower East Side. They constituted a third wave of immigration in the area, which was initially populated by Italians and East Europeans.

The Lower East Side was also home to a large portion of the New York avant-garde. Among those who lived in the neighborhood in the late 1950s and early 1960s were John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Smith, Frank O’Hara, Ted Berrigan, Charles Ludlam, John Vaccaro, and a number of artists and performers...
who later became active in the Warhol Factory, such as Billy Name and Taylor Mead.\(^4\)

The history of the avant-garde and the history of the Caribbeans who lived side by side with them in this area have usually been told as two separate histories. However, the two histories occasionally converged—especially in the queer avant-garde of the 1960s. Within this formation, a number of Anglo filmmakers, performers, and writers were responsive to the Latino culture around them and, conversely, men of Latino—particularly Puerto Rican—background occasionally took part in the movement. This is the case with Tosh Carrillo, a flower shop attendant active in the S&M subculture who appears in Warhol’s films *Horse* (1964) and *Vinyl* (1964); or, more prominently, with performer Mario Montez and director José Rodríguez Soltero.\(^5\)

The convergence of queer Caribbean and experimental culture has left behind a number of elusive traces in the underground films themselves, a number of anecdotes, a string of amazing performances, and an understudied but fascinating career.

The Latino presence in the underground is by no means extensive, but neither is it entirely negligible. It is important to pursue because it will help us defamiliarize the picture of the underground by expanding the roster of names routinely associated with it and by placing the movement in a trans-American web of connections. Moreover, studies of experimental culture have only recently begun to take into account the formative role of ethnic and folk cultures in modernist and avant-garde formations. In an important theorization of modernism’s metropolitan character, Raymond Williams noted the rural, peripheral provenance of most modernists and explained their attraction toward modern aesthetics by pointing out that the avant-garde operated as a sort of international common language for widely disparate local sensibilities.\(^6\) Yet the opposite was perhaps more often the case: scholars such as Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Michael North, and Peter Wollen have shown that modern art did not erase local marks under the rubric of artistic internationalism. The iconoclasm, eclecticism, and decentered organization of modernism permitted—and at times encouraged—the visibility of cultural and ethnic particularities. This insight still has to be applied to the New York queer underground, and this is partly what I will be doing in this essay. In order to systematize the task, I will look at two sides of the underground–Spanish Caribbean connection: one is the reception of Latino culture in the films of non-Latino filmmakers and scriptwriters; the other is the role that Latino performers and filmmakers, especially those of Caribbean origin, played in the 1960s underground.

The reception of Latino cultures in the underground makes for a heterogeneous list. This reception involves the incorporation of pop sounds and images as well as
a half-affectionate, half-mocking, generally uninformed use of Spanish. Among underground filmmakers, Jack Smith may have been the most assiduous in using Latin music in his work: *pasodobles* and Ernesto Lecuona’s bolero “Siboney” in *Flaming Creatures* (1962), Brazilian music in *Scotch Tape* (1961) and at the beginning of *Normal Love* (1963), and a wide spectrum of Latin and Latin-tinged melodies in his 1970s and 1980s performances. More frequently, the underground alluded to Spanish culture by means of images, particularly allusions to Latin divas and screen goddesses, and exoticized locations intended to signify a vaguely Caribbean ambience.

These ambiences work as settings for a pervasive sexual instability. The set of *Flaming Creatures* combines Spanish and Oriental motifs, and Ron Rice’s *Chumlum* (1964), a piece of sumptuous exotica, weaves together allusions to classical Rome, the “Orient,” and the Latin tropics. The stylistic and geographical indeterminacy rhymes with the gender ambiguity of the dimly perceived figures who lie about, dance, and try to seduce one another, epicones with no straightforward gender, only a floating sexuality that attaches itself to anonymous body fragments. In *Flaming Creatures*, it is nearly impossible to disentangle the different players in the erotic melees where breasts, feet, hands, tongues, and penises freely commingle. In *Chumlum* the individual performers are more identifiable: Joel Markman and Beverly Grant cavort indistinctly with males and females, usually in drag; Jack Smith enjoys primarily himself, rolling alone in a hammock; and Mario Montez, arrayed like a baroque Madonna, coyly flees before a number of avid pursuers.

Equally gender bent is Ronald Tavel’s play *The Life of Juanita Castro* (1964), which rendered the Cuban revolution as a demented sex comedy with performers often cast against gender. In the original version of the piece, Andy Warhol’s film of the same name, Fidel Castro is played by a woman (Mercedes Ospina, a Cuban refugee) and Juanita by burly middle-age filmmaker Marie Menken, whom performer Mario Montez described as “Broderick Crawford in drag.” (Montez was Tavel’s first choice for the title role). Here the tropicalist locale is not rendered by means of iconography—the film has no sets and is shot against a bare Factory wall with the cast sitting in bleachers—but by means of a delirious, macaronic Spanish. Juanita, miffed at the way the revolution is turning, berates Raul, Fidel, and Ché for acting as *maricones* and for not caring about the fate of the *guajiros*, while Fidel imperiously denounces her as *gusana*—or defector. In the middle of the play, Fidel stands and rants for some time in Spanish until the rest of the cast begin to snore loudly—perhaps a jab at the notorious length of Fidel Castro’s speeches. The play
was included in the early repertoire of The Playhouse of the Ridiculous, when it was still directed by John Vaccaro and Tavel, before the split that would divide the company into Vaccaro’s and Charles Ludlam’s troupes.

In the Ridiculous milieu, Tavel was not alone in resorting to the macaronic. Charles Ludlam was an eager student of Spanish and Latin American theater. As an undergraduate at Hofstra University, he had staged Calderón de la Barca, Federico García-Lorca, and contemporary Mexican playwright Elena Garro. In later years he made a film titled *The Sorrows of Dolores* (1987), wrote sketches about Puerto Rican queers in the Lower East Side (“Mr. T., or *el Pato*”)[⁸] and had a definite fascination with Hispanic men. He was fond of spicing his plays with fake Spanish, as when in *Camille* (1973) the eponymous protagonist screams that she “never want[s] to go back to work in a shop and live in two little rooms with *cucarachas* and *ratôns* [sic].”⁹ Jack Smith was fond of indulging in the little Spanish he knew, renaming Yvonne de Carlo, “de Carlos,” signing one of his theatrical manifestos Kitchenette del Casino, and naming two characters in late performances “Joanne la Barracuda” and “Yolanda la Pinguíina.”¹⁰

Much of this is simply “camping up” in a language and iconography that these filmmakers and playwrights only knew superficially, and is therefore easy to dismiss as one more instance of mocking and “tropicalizing” Latin culture.¹¹ The Latin elements are indefinite and delocalized. They are also placed on a continuum with Eastern iconography, pagan antiquity, and mythic locales—Smith’s beloved Atlantis—and are therefore deprived of historical and geographical specificity. In this respect, the exotica-mongering of the underground has parallels in some odd corners of postwar popular culture. Les Baxter, a prolific composer during the 1950s and 1960s, became known for mood music full of lush percussion and inventive orchestral arrangements. His albums *Ports of Pleasure* (1957), *Caribbean Moonlight* (1956), *Ritual of the Savage* (1951), and *Que Mango!* (1970) sampled a wide spectrum of exotic styles, from Latin to African to Far Eastern, with occasional excursions into outer space (the album *Music Out of the Moon*, 1947), myth (the piece “Sunken City”), and mysticism. Baxter walked the line between the ridiculous and the visionary. While his work often rehashes sheer clichés with disarming candor, his mixture of musical idioms and unprecedented orchestrations could be considered a form of modernism. For music critic David Toop, Baxter’s work was an example of “Tupperware futurism”: a suburban, utilitarian brand of experimentation also exemplified by steel-tube furniture, tail-finned cars, new plastics, and Muzak.¹² Baxter was merely the most enduring and sophisticated of a group of 1950s and
early 1960s musicians that included Juan García Esquivel, Martin Denny, Arthur Lyman, Korla Pandit, and Yma Sumac, an idiosyncratic vocalist who claimed to be an Inca princess. Combining geomusical dislocation and space-age utopianism, this music bespoke a desire to escape from the dull everyday and, like the underground, brought together the exotic and the erotic. Musical compositions, like Baxter’s collection *The Passions* (1954), and suggestive album covers hinted that exotic fantasyland was a realm of unfettered sensuality as well. Yet while commercial exotica music brought together the erotic and exotic on strictly heterosexual terms, the underground added queerness to the mix.

Perhaps underground filmmakers simply highlighted a potential that had always been there. Exoticism has always been one of the main sources of camp—and camp a vehicle for queer critique; that is, for disaffection with normality, which in postwar United States meant McCarthyism, “Tupperware” modernity, segregated suburbia, and the regimentation of social and erotic life. Against this dismal combination, the likes of Smith, Tavel, Ludlam, Warhol, and Rice fell in love with exotica via the Hollywood cliché: the re-creations of “the Latin” and “the Caribbean” served by the films of their childhood. These were the products of the “Good Neighbor” policy. Channeled through the U.S. Office of the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, which was created in 1941 to foster good relations with Latin America during wartime, the main propaganda arm of the Good Neighbor policy was the Motion Picture Division. The Division sponsored the production of films with Latin themes and settings and encouraged the hiring of stars with market potential in the southern hemisphere. This policy brought Carmen Miranda to the Twentieth Century Fox lot in the early 1940s after a spell in the Schubert theaters on Broadway. In the wake of Miranda’s success, other studios signed on a host of Latin divas such as the Puerto Ricans Lina Romay and Olga “Pepperpot” San Juan, the “Venezuelan Volcano” Acquanetta, the Mexican Dolores del Río, and, the underground’s muse, the Dominican Maria Montez.

Most of these divas were quite queer themselves: odd in personality and excessive in style, they were the products of cultural and geographical displacement. Underground artists re-created them through drag—a way to highlight their artificiality and to demonstrate the portability and malleability of gender. Yet drag may have also served to uncover another important aspect of these actresses’ screen personas: their unconventional femininity. Ronald Tavel pointed out that, for all her silliness and questionable acting, Montez plays powerful women capable of subduing men to their designs; she combines theatrical femininity in costume and
pose with the kind of control that, at the time, Hollywood seldom granted female characters. Carmen Miranda was more the object of a joke than a serious romantic interest: in her films she is precariously attached to male figures, as if her fabulousness hardly found accommodation in the Hollywood gender economy. The same may be said of Lupe Velez, whose career predates the Good Neighbor regime and who in some ways anticipated Miranda’s combination of sensuality and comic excess. In the “Mexican Spitfire” films of the 1930s Lupe’s potential for comedy overrode her sensual appeal, and as was the case with Miranda the humor was fueled by her ethnicity, manifest in accent and firebrand demeanor. Lupe was prone to temper tantrums and to break into bursts of Spanish, while Miranda thickened her accent, injected Portuguese words into her talk, and often sang in her native tongue or in a sort of glossolalia—“chica boom chica boom . . .”—punctuated by spastic winks and eye rolling, superlative gestures and smiles—Miran-dadaism indeed. Miranda’s glossolalic outbreaks and Velez’s torrential rants in a foreign language may have been the inspiration for Tavel’s and Smith’s linguistic exoticism. Montez, for her part, was more laconic and subdued, but, at least in her films, her English was still heavily accented and her ultraglacial deportment signaled her distance from Anglo normalcy—or at least from Hollywood’s version of it. In these three divas, ethnicity was the excess that put them beyond the pale of conventional romance and may have primed them for queer appropriation. Their foreignness may have brought them close to those members of the audience—queers, for example—who felt alien, stranded on the wrong shore. Tavel noted that Maria Montez’s appeal “crucially was to the always second-class citizen, to those who, watching a cowboy and indian movie, identified with the indians, and with third-world persons . . . [to] those who in their soul—in the center of their earliest memories—felt different, their memories unbroken pain: not of a majority, not of they who say what shall be.”

Queer underground artists may have felt spiritually close to Montez and company, but they were physically close to more real forms of Latin American culture: those present on the streets of the Lower East Side and the East Village. The underground’s interest in exotica and its mucking around in (pseudo-)Spanish was an unofficial Good Neighbor policy and evidences a degree of sympathy toward the actual Caribbeans around them. As in the queer reception of the Latin diva, this may have been a case of the alien greeting the alien, of one despised minority warming up to another, even across a gap of incomprehension. Queers were clearly not the toast of the town in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but neither were Latino
immigrants—which, in the case of New York, usually meant Puerto Ricans. Since the early 1940s, the mainstream press and Hollywood films had drummed up the Puerto Rican menace at length, prompting protests from Puerto Rican civic organizations, while presumably better-informed ethnographers and sociologists such as Oscar Lewis, Nathan Glazer, and Daniel Monihan did little to dispel prejudice. They described New York–based Puerto Ricans as a prototypically dysfunctional minority, an example of “the culture of poverty” and as a nonassimilating community characterized by deprivation and lack of structure. Queer underground artists, who championed B movies, faded film cults, drag, the rundown inner city, and sexual unconventionality at large, may have taken on “Latin culture” as another devalued repertoire to be recycled in their art. This is surely reductive and patronizing and implicitly accepts the contemporary view of Latinos as a social problem and a minority in need of redemption. But from another perspective, the underground’s Hispanophilia was a queer attempt to align sexual with cultural, social, and ethnic otherness, and to bring it all together in a common front of dissent.

Other reasons, too, may account for the underground’s fascination with Puerto Rican culture. According to George Chauncey’s pioneering work on postwar New York sexual cultures, Puerto Ricans developed a distinct homosexual subculture less based on passing than on flaunting, a subculture frequently dominated by fiery queens that was visible in the streets and developed an active party network. The Puerto Rican gay world and the white gay circuits often intersected. In an early 1960s piece for *The Village Voice*, David McReynolds reported the abundance of homosexual blacks and Puerto Ricans in Greenwich Village gay rendezvous and attributed this abundance to the relative absence of racism among homosexuals: it is “a sub-culture [sic] that has fewer color or class lines—the common denominator is sex. In addition, the homosexual sub-culture has the atmosphere of glitter and pretense to luxury which is difficult to find in the drab and crowded streets of Harlem.” Glazer and Monihan concurred that in “bohemia . . . the ethnic lines mean less than in other areas of the city.” Another reason for the visibility of Latinos in queer milieus may have been that, as Larry La Fountain–Stokes has pointed out, migration was frequently allied to sexual unconventionality: it was often the case that island (s)exiles were escaping not only poverty but sexual prejudice and conservatism as well.

Ethnic lines may have meant less in the underground, but they were not completely erased. No matter how kindred in outsider status, Spanish culture remained rather unintelligible to white underground artists, which is why Latino motifs were
used to invoke an unformalizable excess in sexual and personal relations. A good example is Bill Vehr’s *Avocada* (1965). One of the original players in Charles Ludlam’s Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Vehr wrote *Whores of Babylon* (1968) and co-authored, with Ludlam, *Turd in Hell* (1969), two of the troupe’s early hits. In addition to his stage work he gave readings of Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* and made a handful of films during the 1960s, freely indulging in exotica and tropicalism.22 *Avocada* and *Brothel: Tangiers Film Cycle* (1965) were included in 1965 Filmmakers’ Cinematheque screenings, and an undated program (probably from 1967) of Mario Montez films at City Hall Cinema also lists *The Mystery of the Spanish Lady* and *Lil Picard’s Beauty Environment of the Year 2165.*23 Of this group of films, only *Avocada* is extant. *Brothel* seems to have been the most ambitious; its cast included many of Smith’s regulars—Mario Montez, Francis Francine, and Jack Smith, together with Piero Heliczer and Tosh Carillo—and was described in Cinematheque programs as “a cornucopia of concupiscence” and “this year’s *Flaming Creatures.*” The film was seized by customs officers, possibly alerted about its unconventional content, in October of 1969, when Vehr crossed the Canadian border on the way back from a screening in Toronto. Mekas denounced the seizure in his *Movie Journal* column, and a few months later Gregory Battcock wrote a letter to recently elected Richard Nixon denouncing the confiscation as another example of the all-too-frequent abuses against artistic freedom and demanding that the film be returned.24 In all likelihood, it was not, and the film still languishes in some seized goods warehouse.

*Avocada* was rediscovered by filmmaker and programmer Jim Hubbard on the shelves of the Filmmakers’ Cooperative in the late 1980s. The film was restored by Robert Haller, from Anthology Film Archives, and screened at the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1989, where it was received with boos and catcalls, perhaps because of its dim image—difficult, at times, to make out—its minimal action, and its slowness. The film starts out with a frequent underground trope: the masturbating loner, in this case a woman (Carol Morrell) who, in Jack Smith’s blurb for the film, “writhes as if she were born to writhe in movies . . . among flickering candles and smoldering camera movement.”25 The scenario itself is not necessarily of Latin derivation: in addition to *Chumlum, Flaming Creatures,* and Rodríguez Soltero’s *Jerovi* (1965), it appears in Brakhage’s *Flesh of Morning* (1956), in one of the episodes of Warhol’s *Couch* (1964), and in Stephen Dwoskin’s *Alone* (1963–64). Vehr’s film lacks the languor of these other titles; it begins placidly, with the protagonist lying on a mattress on the floor, surrounded by candles, and contemplating
her reflection in a mirror. However, as a surly, thuggish man and woman enter the scene, what began as mild, masturbatory enjoyment gradually turns violent. The new arrivals seem to bite the protagonist and draw blood, and toward the end of the film they produce a slab of flesh that they drape on and rub against their bodies. What started as pleasurable self-relation modulates into aggression and cannibalism, and sexuality and violence become closely intertwined. The film can be easily glossed through George Bataille’s ideas about the proximity of sexual pleasure and pain, experiences that transcend ordinary thresholds of sensation and are based on the loss of subjective limits, on defilement and mutilation. Writing for the Village Voice on the occasion of the film’s rediscovery, Manohla Dargis called it “seductive in its evocation of ancient rites, vestal virgins, and sacrifice.” She pointed out that the film could be regarded as an underground reworking of a number of cinematic motifs, and she found it reminiscent of late Jack Smith, of a hypothetical collaboration between Kenneth Anger and Hershell Gordon Lewis, or even of “a home-movie remake of Intolerance’s orgiastic Babylon.” In addition, one might see the film as a reworking of the famous dream scene in Luis Buñuel’s Los Olvidados (1950), where the protagonist, Pedro, hallucinates about his mother onanistically pouring milk on her thighs, laughing on the verge of hysteria or perhaps sexual ecstasy, and carrying an unwieldy chunk of meat to the bedside of the alarmed child. Like in Vehr’s later re-creation, in Buñuel the scene is quite unstable, mixing hetero- and homoeroticism, sexuality and cruelty.

In Jack Smith, exotica—and this includes Latin exotica—is less linked to sexual than to visual excess—an excess best expressed by icons such as Maria Montez, by Von Sternberg’s Dietrich films, and by Smith’s own “secret flix”—“Spanish galleon flix,” Judy Canova flix, or The Pirate (1948) (another instance of Latin delirium). These are films of unpent visuality and utter commitment to fantasy. They cannot be contained by language or existing conceptual molds and therefore offer nonformalizable, intensely affective experiences. Because of this, they are acts of pure expenditure that debunk monetary equivalence and practicality. This kind of unrecoverable expenditure is what Smith always wanted to transmit with his work—and what he celebrated in Far Eastern, South Pacific, or Caribbean art and culture. In his famous essay, “The Perfect Film Appositeness of Maria Montez,” he pointed out that Puerto Ricans instinctively liked and understood Montez’s films and “the whole gaudy array of secret flix.” He may have noted this instinctive understanding at the Lower East Side’s “tiny nabes” to which many of these films were confined at the time, or perhaps he may have been assuming it on the basis of the visual flair of
some examples of popular Puerto Rican culture. An example that seems to have been influential for him was the *altarcitos*, the home altars consisting of assortments of candles, amulets, personal objects, and religious figurines common in rural Puerto Rico.\(^{28}\) Smith built several such altars during his lifetime, and at times he integrated them into his films (as in the opening scene of *Normal Love*). According to Jonas Mekas’s and Stefan Brecht’s accounts, Smith had a particularly large one in his Greene Street loft during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and it was the background to his home performances during those years. Like his work, these forms of untutored art were totally gratuitous: they were motivated by devotion, not profit, were inserted in quotidian spaces—the home or the street—and transfigured ordinary objects with a sacred significance. They were enactments of the gift—an anti-economy (or, in George Bataille’s terms, a “general economy”) that Smith found increasingly rare in the art world but that he assumed to be the norm in the imaginary geography of his fantasies—“Baghdad,” “Atlantis”—and among his Latin neighbors on the Lower East Side.

If anyone embodied the economy of the gift in the 1960s New York underground, Puerto Rican performer Mario Montez was it. No one gave so much for so little. Mario is always mentioned in accounts of the underground, but only that. His sensibility and performance style left an imprint in the movement which has yet to be noticed. Mario got into film through Jack Smith. They met by accident in the early 1960s in the hallway of an apartment on Ludlow Street, on the Lower East Side, and they had a brief, tempestuous relationship that flowed into a number of artistic projects.\(^{29}\) Montez was a model for Smith’s *plastiques*—or photo tableaux—of the early 1960s and starred in *Flaming Creatures* and *Normal Love*. In *Flaming Creatures* he looks at times like a thrift store version of Concha Pérez, the Marlene Dietrich character in Josef von Sternberg’s *The Devil Is a Woman* (1935), but his name—“Dolores Flores”—luscious black mane, and sultry disposition evoke Dolores—or Lola—Flores, a fiery Spanish chanteuse who was at the height of her career when the film was made. In *Normal Love* he plays a mermaid, probably an allusion to María Montez’s role in *Siren of Atlantis* (1949). In the opening sequence he relaxes in a bath, unaware of a black spider that slowly descends upon him. Later he is raped by a werewolf in a swamp.

Smith and Montez had similar sensibilities: they were both interested in costuming
and posing, arcane film lore, and Hollywood exotica. After working with Smith, Montez also made films with Ron Rice, Andy Warhol, Piero Heliczer, and José Rodríguez Soltero, and eventually became a staple player in the Theater of the Ridiculous, first under Vaccaro and Tavel’s direction and later under Charles Ludlam’s. Ludlam always claimed that he learned makeup from Mario, but Montez left his mark in the visual style of the company in other ways as well. Under the imprint of Montez Creations, he designed and sewed the troupe’s costumes until he gave up the stage in 1976, after the production of Ludlam’s Caprice. Ludlam may not be the only one Mario taught. Jack Smith might have become knowledgeable about Latin music through Mario. Mario was also a connoisseur of old films—Smith’s secret flix. He regularly combed TV Guide looking for oddities and held late-night film-watching parties at his loft or at José Rodríguez Soltero’s when they were both living in the same building on Center Street, near Canal. He was also interested in sound recording. Ken Jacobs used Mario’s tape recorder to compose the soundtrack of Blonde Cobra in 1961.30 Mario used his machine to record movie soundtracks, which he taped directly off the television set and liked to play back independently of the image. This rare attention to film sound may be one of the sources for the soundtracks of Normal Love and, especially, Flaming Creatures, whose soundtrack is usually attributed exclusively to Tony Conrad. In fact, Flaming Creatures starts with a sound bite from the Maria Montez vehicle Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves (1944) that might have come from Mario’s tape collection: an orchestral blast followed by an awed male voice whispering “Tonight . . . Ali Baba is coming tonight.”

Apart from these subtle, easily overseen contributions, Mario became one of the faces of the underground. Together with Taylor Mead, Jack Smith, and Edie Sedgwick, he was one of the few veritable “underground stars,” as Mekas once put it.31 He was hailed by Winston Archer as “Manhattan’s most famous transvestite”—although Archer misnamed him “Maria”—and he attracted some mainstream coverage for his films and stage performances. He was the subject of an entire film program, shown at City Hall Cinema on June 26 and 27, probably in 1967,32 that consisted of excerpts from Normal Love, unspecified “short films” by Warhol, Vehr’s lost titles, and a “ferryboat sequence from a new work” by Piero Heliczer—now distributed by the Filmmakers Coop as Heliczer’s Dirt (1965), where he briefly appears as a beaming sailor with a pencil-thin mustache and flanked by two nuns.33

Much of what Jack Smith wrote about Maria Montez is easily applicable to Mario: he was incapable of conventional, naturalistic acting, but his failures nevertheless produced luminous results. His inability was accompanied by rapt self-absorption
and belief. This belief is often at odds with the attitude of other performers who, especially in the Warhol films, make their ambivalence about what is going on quite evident. They act with irony or maintain a certain distance from their roles, as if intimating that they are only in it to pass the time, so no one should expect much. The clearest example of this is *Harlot* (1964). Mario is the performer who keeps the film going after the unseen speakers lose momentum and simply ramble on and the other figures on the tableau make clear their boredom and vexation. Not Mario: ever game, he keeps rolling on the couch, strikes yet another insinuating pose, produces and ingests yet another banana—on and on through the end of the film. His unmoving resolve to keep giving, even when the scene is unfocused or chaotic, made Mario perfect for roles where he is victimized, made fun of, and ostracized, or where he is simply out of sync with his environment. One instance is the episode of *The Chelsea Girls* (1966) based on Ron Heide’s *The Bed*, where he plays the neighbor who stops by, made up to the nines, to sing a couple of Gershwin tunes to Ed Hood and his drunk trick, Patrick Fleming, but is ridiculed by them and eventually exits the scene: “I know when I’m not wanted,” he muses as she leaves. In *Hedy* (1965) and *More Milk, Yvette* (1965), he plays Hedy Lamarr and Lana Turner, respectively, as aging stars. Lamarr tries desperately to hold on to her quickly vanishing beauty by means of plastic surgery. After her operation, she hits the stores but is picked up for shoplifting and prosecuted. At the hearing, all her former husbands rally against her in front of the unsympathetic judge. In *More Milk*, Turner compulsively changes clothes, helped by her sour chamber maid, sings show tunes, incestuously dances with and embraces her daughter (played by Richard Schmidt, Mario’s boyfriend at the time), and goes after rather indifferent younger men—a detail probably inspired by Kenneth Anger’s account of Lana Turner’s love life in *Hollywood Babylon*. This lack of synchronicity takes place not only between Mario and his environment but also within Mario; it defines his style of drag, an improbable mixture of glamour and frumpiness. Passing was not in the books for Mario. His masculine, well-defined body showed under the drag. Something was always slightly off about him: a wig that was a little too unkempt, as in *Hedy* or *Screen Test # 2* (1965); or clothes that were too humdrum, as in *More Milk, Yvette* or *The Chelsea Girls*. He gives the impression of being precariously pinned together, as if about to come apart any second. In this respect, Mario may be the unacknowledged predecessor of Vaginal Davis’s grungy drag. But unlike Davis, who is always self-conscious, ironic, and articulate, Mario just sticks to his female persona with silent devotion.

In part, this internal gap, this fissure *en abyme* within himself, is the queerest
aspect of Mario’s work and brings him close to subsequent Puerto Rican queer culture. When Mario was still on the stage with Ludlam’s company, writers such as Luis Rafael Sánchez, Miguel Ramos Otero, and Victor Fragarso began to develop an open Puerto Rican queer writing, often influenced by the example of Severo Sarduy as well as by North American writers such as Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde.36 This writing came at a time of radical self-scrutiny, when Puerto Rican historians and critics were beginning to question the presumed unity of national culture and identity. In the postwar years when Montez came of age, this dream of national unity had buttressed the political project of President Muñoz Marín, the designer of Puerto Rico’s status as Estado Libre Asociado. But the fantasy of unity had its roots in the classic texts on Puerto Rican nationalism, such as Manuel Zeno Gandía’s novel *La charca* (1894) and Antonio S. Pedreira’s *Insularismo* (1934). As numerous Puerto Rican scholars have recently revealed, this was an illusory unity, built on the suppression of queers, peasants, leftists, women, and displaced workers.37 The fantasy of unity was also built on the suppression of the essential hybridity of the nation, on the constant traffic between peninsular Spain and the Caribbean, Spanish and Anglo, the island and the United States, home and abroad, that is intrinsic to Puerto Rico. As is often the case, mainstream ideas of nationhood were channeled through images of mainstream masculinity. The main goal of nationalist discourses was to promote a decolonized Puerto Rico that was uncritically conceived (in Yolanda Martínez San-Miguel’s words) “as predominantly Hispanic, white, heterosexual, and male.”38 In the early 1970s, this national-cultural paradigm began to show cracks, partly because the economic model of moderate growth that had sustained it was starting to stagnate. The notion of a well-wrought nation came under critique, the counterhistories of suppressed collectives were excavated, and the unexamined link between nation and mainstream masculinity came under fire. Queer writers in particular took up this last issue. In the place of a monolithic masculinity that somehow “naturally” stood for Puerto Ricaness (the mature, reproductive manliness rhapsodized by Antonio Pedreira, for example), they installed drag, gender- and cultural-crossing, sexual and generic undecidability—figures that fit better the actual complexities of the nation.

Mario stands as an unacknowledged predecessor to much of this. He delved into bubble-gum Yankee film cults, became active in an internationalist avant-garde, and embodied gender undecidability but still maintained a distinct sense of identity as a Puerto Rican performer, affirming his Catholicism and his Hispanic roots. In addition, Mario can be aligned with much performance work that went on after him,
performance that was similarly responsive to mass culture, invested in border-crossing, and skeptical about the presumed authenticity and unity of any identity—including Latino identity. Montez’s work appeared too early to be reclaimed by these later writers and performers—who have often pointed out Jack Smith as an influence but have unanimously forgotten Mario. Perhaps tired of giving a lot and being mocked and belittled in return—even by his comrades in the underground front lines—he vanished from the scene. For several decades, he has remained in the shadows, unwilling to return, even in conversation, to his life as an avant-garde performer.

José Rodríguez Soltero performed a similar disappearing act. Like Mario, he may have been around too early to be recognized as an important precedent by subsequent filmmakers and video artists. Born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, he received his BA at the University of Puerto Rico, pursued graduate work at San Francisco State College and at the Film Institute of the College of New York, and eventually emerged in the New York underground, when he was still in his early twenties, with two films: El pecado original (1964) and Jerovi (1965). El pecado original was shot in Puerto Rico while he was still a student, and was conceived as an homage to Luis Buñuel. In notes written for a screening at the Hull House Film Festival in Chicago in 1965, Rodríguez Soltero described the film as “a surrealistic short . . . exposing the author’s attitude toward virginity, sex, love, marriage, religion and the status-quo of his native country.” The notes for the Filmmakers’ Cinematheque screening at the Astor Place Playhouse, on June 7, 1965, foregrounded the Puerto Rican stakes of the film and its Latin American filiation: “It is a surrealistic presentation in dream images of the Puerto Rican status quo as depicted by a negro Puerto Rican girl and a Caucasian [sic] American boy.” Puerto Rico as a black girl: Rodríguez Soltero is as far from the mainstream nationalist imaginary as Mario Montez. At the same time, the interest in exploring “the status quo of his native country” and the allusion to Buñuel show Rodríguez Soltero’s simultaneous investment in localism—in the specificities of Puerto Rican identity—and in the internationalist avant-garde. Buñuel mediates between the two poles: he made his name in Paris as a member of André Breton’s surrealist group but later moved to Mexico, where he developed an extraordinary body of work that explored Mexican locality through the optic of surrealism and combined the idiom of native commercial film with experimental touches. Buñuel was, for many Latin filmmakers of Rodríguez Soltero’s generation,
the answer to the question of how to be an experimental artist without shedding Latin American specificity.

Much of Rodríguez Soltero’s work is an answer to this question. His films and performances combine “Northern” avant-gardism and Latin American reference, a duality that I use heuristically because metropolitan experimental cultures were themselves hybrid developments often inspired by the peripheries, while peripheral artists abundantly drew on metropolitan idioms. In Rodríguez Soltero, this cultural traffic is also driven by the intent to represent queer bodies and desires and, in a later moment in his career, by his political commitment to decolonization and anti-imperialism. His next film, Jerovi, lacks direct Latin American reference; it was shot in San Francisco in early 1965, edited in Puerto Rico, and first shown in New York at City Hall Cinema in a program that also included Gregory Markopoulos’s films. Part portrait film, part mythopoetic essay, Jerovi shows its protagonist (Jeroví Sansón Carrasco, who also commissioned and financed the film) sauntering through a stylized natural setting. He pauses occasionally to smell a rose that he carries in his hand, to admire himself in a hand mirror, and to kiss his reflection on the surface of a pond. Eventually he sheds his robe and rolls ecstatically on the grass, apparently masturbating. The film coyly hints at this rather than show it right out, partly because it was made barely a year after the
seizure of *Flaming Creatures* and about the time when *Scorpio Rising* was on trial for obscenity and partly because the film is intended as an evocative, poetic essay rather than an exercise in blunt eroticism. *Jerovi* was conceived to be screened at silent speed, so when it is projected correctly, the protagonist’s movement through the foggy landscape has a dreamlike vagueness. Because of its mythological underpinnings, the film has an affinity with the mythopoetic strand of the underground—with Markopoulos’s use of Greek myth or Willard Maas and Ben Moore’s *Narcissus* (1956). However, Rodríguez Soltero’s main source of inspiration was Jean Cocteau’s *Blood of a Poet* (1932) and, especially, *Orpheus* (1949). In *Orpheus*, the eponymous character, a poet played by Jean Marais, is often filmed against his own reflection on mirrors and puddles that serve as passages to the underworld. At the same time, the setting of Rodríguez Soltero’s film is not the contemporary Parisian cafés and enigmatic mansions of Cocteau’s film but a rather unspecified mixture of the Oriental and the Caribbean. The protagonist wears a richly brocaded Chinese robe, and the landscape looks like a mixture of hazy English garden and tropical forest.

*Jerovi* was shown at New York’s Filmmakers Cinematheque, which was then in Astor Place, and this is where Charles Ludlam first saw it. He regarded it as his favorite experimental film. Eventually Rodríguez Soltero and Ludlam met, became friends, and roomed together for a time. They ended up collaborating on Rodríguez Soltero’s next film project, *Life, Death, and Assumption of Lupe Velez*, filmed in the fall of 1966 and shown for the first time at the Cinematheque in January of 1967. Ludlam would later describe the film as a “Puerto Rican epic,”42 even if its Puerto Rican character is limited to José and Mario Montez’s participation (Mario plays Lupe) and to the Latin music in the soundtrack. Rather than a Puerto Rican piece per se, *Lupe* was a Latino filmmaker’s attempt at the kind of Latin camp that Tavel, Warhol, Vehr, and Smith were practicing at the time.

In this respect, the film deserves comparison with Warhol’s own *Lupe*, made a few months earlier, in December of 1965. Not about Lupe Vélez, Warhol’s piece is indirectly about Edie Sedgwick, who was already perilously close to the edge at the time and seems out of it through much of the film. Intended as a two-screen projection, the film contrasts two sides of Lupe’s life, one on each screen, each with its own distinctive visual style: on the left screen lateral pans and zooming predominate; on the right screen the pans are often vertical. The juxtaposition at times creates a dizzying combination of movements. The left screen is full of warm browns and reds; the right one, of cool pinks and pastels. The left is dominated by a wall mirror that duplicates the action and evokes in turn the film’s double-screen
format. The formal differences are compounded by thematic differences. The left screen shows a sunny Lupe, as she wakes up, exchanges banter and gossip with a friend (Billy Name) who trims and combs her hair, and puts on makeup while she is still in bed; the second screen depicts a somber Lupe who appears lost among the bulky furniture of a luxurious dining room; she sits alone at the table, pecks at her food, and at times seems about to nod off. The film closes (uncharacteristically for Warhol) with a montage of shots of Sedgwick with her head in the toilet. Despite the spirited morning scene, *Lupe* is a dark film, a study of self-destruction along the lines of other Warhol titles such as *Drunk* (1965) or *Suicide* (1965).

Rodríguez Soltero’s film is much less morbid. His *Lupe* is a good-humored rendition of Lupe’s excessively quotidian life and focuses on the campy side of the actress’s personality, conveyed through the farcical quality of the performances, the ornamented interiors, the languorous pace, and Mario’s off-screen voice answering an interviewer (“What’s your favorite color?”—“Lilac. It is very pleasant. It cheers you and loves you. I like lilacs and orchids.”). Rodríguez Soltero’s *Lupe* also commits suicide, but her death mixes comedy with tragedy—she opens the oven door, turns on the gas, and reclines bleary-eyed on the couch as her television flickers in the background; her white angora cat (actually, Mario Montez’s pet, White Pussy) is wiped out before she is and is shown lying flat on the kitchen floor.
But death is not the last word here. Through the mediation of an angel who recalls her to the afterlife, Lupe becomes transfigured into a spiritual presence at the end of the film when, rendered ethereal by superimposition and slow motion, she happily scampers through a bare winter landscape in a bright red coat.

This is the moment of Lupe’s “assumption”—the rise to heaven in soul and body that, according to Catholic dogma, the Virgin Mary experienced. Lupe is thus sanctified—the star cult modulating into a religious cult. Perhaps Lupe’s many trials during her earthly life have earned her sainthood and a place in heaven. In any case, she ends up a new version of the Madonna, less Spartan than the original but, to judge by Catholic statuary, with a similar flair for clothes. The slippage between Lupe and the Madonna suggested by the assumption not only highlights the religious undertones of pop cultism but also reveals the outright campiness of Catholic trappings and the star quality of the Catholic pantheon. Saints, Christs, and Madonnas are stars-before-the-stars, figures of passion and excess endlessly reproduced and revered and occasionally turned into the raw material of camp by Latin artists. Rodríguez Soltero’s telescoping of pop and religious iconography anticipates Amalia Mesa-Bains, whose altars to Dolores del Río and Rita Hayworth combine Hollywood memorabilia and Baroque religious art; Yolanda López, who paints the Virgin of Guadalupe in the clothes and attitudes of contemporary Mexican women; and Frances Salomé España, whose video Spitfire (1991)—a title that gestures toward Lupe Vélez—examines, with deconstructive intent, images of Chicana, mestiza femininity running from Aztec female deities to Catholic Marian cults to twentieth-century film stars.

According to Rodríguez Soltero, Lupe was partly funded by Warhol, who gave him a check that helped cover lab costs. Like Warhol’s film, Soltero’s Lupe was loosely inspired by Kenneth Anger’s biographical sketch of the actress in Hollywood Babylon, while its cluttered visual style was influenced by Von Sternberg’s Dietrich vehicles. Taking ample freedom with Anger’s account, Rodríguez Soltero narrates Lupe’s rise from whoredom to stardom, her subsequent decline, and her eventual suicide. In between, Lupe walks the streets at night (where she meets her beau), is visited by the vice squad (who search her apartment), dances to a vaguely Indian tune in a gypsy costume, parsimoniously puts on makeup and jewelry assisted by her maid (Lola Pashalinski, of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company), attends a premiere at the height of her glory, and is interviewed in her living room by a dowdy female reporter. The sad end comes after Lupe is abandoned by her paramour, who catches her rolling on the couch with an elfish lesbian keenly played by Ludlam.
(During the interview, Lupe is asked about her favorite leading men: “—Weeell, Johnny Weissmuller . . . Jack Smith, Tolstoy, Charles Ludlam . . . although I think I like him better as a woman”). These episodes are structured in sequences often separated by leader and empty colored screens. The editing is elliptical but intelligible, and the camera is often handheld, conveying the impression of intimacy caught on the run, as if the film were an improvised documentary of the actress’s life. The feeling of spontaneity is reinforced by the image frequently going in and out of focus, as if the operator had to keep adjusting the lens in order to follow the action. The film can be seen as a compendium of underground styles: it uses superimpositions, like Rice’s Chumlum; it is a color-saturated baroque in the style of Smith’s Normal Love; it is often kitschy and giggly like the films of George and Mike Kuchar; the pendular zooming in and out in a trippy sequence (when Lupe and her boyfriend lie in bed) recalls Warhol; and an early scene in which unidentified off-screen voices comment on Lupe’s looks as she sits in her living room and talks on the telephone suggests Harlot. Despite such eclecticism, these motifs are homogenized by a distinct sensibility. The film’s narrative pull; the combination of acerbic wit, melodrama, and lyricism; and the sharp visual style are distinctly Rodríguez Soltero’s own.

The soundtrack is as dense as the visual track and comprises songs and instrumental music edited back to back, interrupted only by two spoken interludes. The soundtrack provides a running commentary on the image in the style of Anger’s Scorpio Rising. Prominent in the musical mix is the bolero, which might be described as the tango of the Caribbean: a slow tempo with a strong rhythmic background usually sung to lyrics about passionate, ill-fated love. The film opens with a black screen accompanied by the song “Gracias” (“. . . por haberte conocido . . .”), which announces that this is going to be a nostalgic homage to someone departed. Early in the film, when Lupe crawls up the stairs to her apartment after a night out in the streets, another bolero moans about a “corazón desesperado” (“desperate heart”), and when she puts on makeup and jewelry in her boudoir, another bolero sings admiringly, “Dime dónde hay una muchacha parecida a ti, y yo la iré a buscar.” (“Tell me where there is a girl like you, and I will go in search of her.”) Rodríguez Soltero’s use of this music predates Pedro Almodóvar, who revived the old-fashioned Latin style in La ley del deseo (1986) and Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios (1989), as well as experimental video artists such as Ana María Simó (How to Kill Her, 1988) and Raúl Ferrera Balanquet and Enrique Novelo Cascante (Mérida Proscrita, 1990). All of these artists use boleros to punctuate intensely melodramatic moments in a way that is at once heartfelt and ironic, reverential and
detached, and ties contemporary aesthetics and concerns with a past moment in Latin popular culture—the golden age of the genre was over by the mid-1960s, when *Lupe* was being made. The bolero has pan-Latin appeal, and as contemporary Puerto Rican writer Luis Rafael Sánchez has suggested, it is an expression of Latin American modernity: of Spanish origin, it also has Caribbean and African elements, and it sings the vitality of the passions over tradition and social constraint. Sánchez ties the boom of the genre to the expansion of the middle classes throughout Latin America in the 1930s and 1940s and to the consequent development of a continental cabaret culture—*la cultura Latinoamericana de la noche*—with such legendary venues as Tropicana in Havana, Pasapoga in Caracas, Macao and Leda in Distrito Federal, and Dancing Park and Venecia in San Juan. Some of the main figures of this circuit were drag queens, such as “El Príncipe de Ébano”: “el último món bello que fue estrella en el Tropicana.” But the genre has other queer connotations. Iris Zavala and Frances Aparicio have pointed out its androgyny, both in the lyrics, which often sing of wounded, intensely vulnerable males and strong women, and in the ambiguous voices of its main interpreters—from the deep contralto of Ruth Hernandez to the high tenor of Antonio Machín. In Rafael Castillo’s clever gloss, boleros speak incessantly of the essential solipsism of love, a passion where one loses oneself in the other or dissolves the other into oneself, always without a reciprocal rapport. Many of these connotations and cultural memories—hybridity, androgyny, the intensity of desire, and the doomed nature of love—resurface in *Lupe*.

The film uses other musical styles besides the bolero. Lupe is seduced by her lesbian nemesis to the sound of Marlene Dietrich’s “Falling in Love Again,” an English version of her famous hit from *The Blue Angel* (1930). When Lupe walks to the waterfront to meet her lover and attempt reconciliation, a plaintive flamenco song expresses bitter regret: “Mi ma[d]re me lo decía / que yo a ti no te quisiera / que ella a ti te conocía . . .” (“My mother used to tell me / not to fall in love with you / since she knew what you were really like . . .”). Lupe’s suicide is played against The Supremes’ “I Feel Alone.” And Vivaldi’s music (“I hope he won’t blow his wig,” José wrote in the hand program), bright and upbeat, comes on in moments of triumph such as the movie premiere and Lupe’s assumption.

Rodríguez Soltero’s subsequent films are not prefigured by Lupe so much as by the performance *LBJ*, staged at The Bridge, an experimental theater in St. Mark’s Place, in the East Village, on April 8, 1966. *LBJ* was to be part of a ten-artist presentation, with Montez and Ludlam also in the program, but apparently the evening fell
apart after Rodríguez Soltero’s act. He described it as a “scrambled love-hate paradox in USA, 1966.” José and his collaborators walked on stage carrying a live chicken, which they hung from a beam by the legs, they ordered the audience out of their seats and then stormed the orchestra. The stage lights went out, a strobe light came on, and the troupe proceeded to advance from the back of the room to the stage jumping over the seats to the sound of the top pop hit of the year, “The Ballad of the Green Berets.” According to Fred MacDarrah, who reviewed the event for the *Village Voice*, “the effect was like a patrol of soldiers under fire on a battlefield with the mortar, machine gun tracer bullets, and screeching rockets overhead.” When José reached the stage, he attached a disused forty-eight-star U.S. flag to an asbestos screen with the letters *LBJ* and set it on fire. Part of the audience applauded, while others were outraged. A gentleman in a dinner jacket shouted “Pinko! Fag!” and Nancy Webber of the *New York Post* later declared she had felt “physically, spiritually, morally, and aesthetically oppressed by the show.” Arthur Seiner, director of the theater, came to Rodríguez Soltero’s defense, stating that the performance may not have been great theater but that if it mitigated any suffering caused by the war, it was welcome. Seiner and Soltero were summoned, and the authorities immediately moved to revoke The Bridge’s license, using as pretext the fact that children had been on stage in an earlier play that used obscene language. MacDarrah wondered if the city was zeroing in on St. Mark’s Place. Warhol and the Velvet Underground had just been served another summons for operating at the nearby Dom without a cabaret license.47

As if following up on this event, Soltero’s next film leaned more toward politics than camp. *Dialogue with Che*, made at the end of 1967, was conceived as a double-screen projection partly inspired by Warhol’s *The Chelsea Girls*. Rather than two different images unfolding simultaneously in the style of Warhol’s film, *Dialogue* showed the same image side by side with a small time lag between the two screens. Rodríguez Soltero started shooting shortly after the death of Ché in Bolivia in 1967. The film is partly a work of mourning, a way to come to terms with the loss, and partly an attempt to counter the conservative views of Ché Guevara disseminated in the mainstream media.

In tune with Warhol’s example, the action of *Dialogue* is minimal. The film opens with a tableau that reproduces the famous image of Guevara’s dead body at the morgue surrounded by his assassins, a tableau that is also slightly reminiscent of the iconography of the dead body of Christ. The end of the film shows the immediately preceding moments, when the killers, led by a sinister figure in sunglasses,
suit, and tie, beat up and shoot the revolutionary. The lengthy middle section consists of long takes of the actor cast as Ché (Venezuelan artist Rolando Peña) talking about the revolutionary, reading extensive fragments from Roberto Fernández Retamar’s introduction to a volume of Ché Guevara’s writings, ranting about the sorry state of Latin America, and having a slightly fractious conversation with the director, who remains off screen. (“Are you still shooting, José?”—“Yes.”—“You are a jerk.”) During these takes, the camera zooms in and out on the scene, moving from close-ups of Peña’s hands, face, the book he is holding, and a glass of water by his side to long shots that show the whole set—a bare room with only a table on which the protagonist sits and leans, a blackened window on the left, and a door to the right. At times the zooming creates humorous effects: it advances purposefully to land on one of Peña’s nipples or on his hands resting on his belt and framing his crotch. The zooming, the black-and-white stock, the stark lighting, the garbled synch sound, Peña’s improvisational performance, and the double screen recall Warhol to the extent that one can see the film as a clever pastiche of Warhol’s style. (In an odd synchronicity, as Rodríguez Soltero was making the film, Warhol’s assistant Gerard Malanga was stuck in Rome without any means of support and without his employer’s aid. In order to raise money to return to the United States, he made and tried to sell some silkscreens of Ché Guevara in Warhol’s style, using the image of dead Ché at the morgue.)

The humor and the Pop gestures are only occasional in a film that is essentially political. The dialogue between Peña and Rodríguez Soltero revolves around the importance of Ché Guevara and the impossibility of change in Latin America, where all aspirations to justice are thwarted by “a few exploiters” and widespread “infamy.” The chance for revolution died with Ché, and the possibility of continuing the struggle via alternative media (that is, through a film like Dialogue) seems dubious because the concept, the execution, and the dissemination of political film are all plagued with problems. Peña is skeptical about his ability as an actor—about the ability of any actor—to incarnate Ché, not only because Ché was “an extraordinary figure . . . like Christ or like the Buddha . . . who gave all of his energy, all of his being”—but also because he was just a man “with physical needs like any other” or “maybe even just a big cheat.” How could a performer keep these different facets in focus? In the end, he decides to pass up the role: “Are you listening to me, José? Can’t you see that this is all a big hoax?”

The film’s political credentials are corroborated by the fact that it’s dedicated to Bertolt Brecht. The text is also Brechtian, and politics is thus not only in the
content but also in how this content is presented. Peña’s way of slipping in and out of character, of convincingly embodying Ché—with beard, khakis, military boots, cigar, and beret—while at the same time commenting on and distancing himself from the role, are directly inspired by Brecht’s theory. Also inspired by Brecht is the way in which the most potentially cathartic moment in the film, the fatal denouement, is conveyed with detachment: it is extremely abrupt and repeated twice, first in long shot, then in medium shot, while the soundtrack—the rattle of the machine guns and the screams of the victim—stutters, fades in and out throughout the scene. The film’s Brechtianisms are not directly drawn from the source but rather from the way Brecht’s ideas were reworked by Jean-Luc Godard and other political filmmakers of the time. In fact, because of its essayistic, discursive quality and its way of foregrounding its haphazard, unfinished character, *Dialogue* is close to Godard’s films from those years, especially to *La Chinoise* (1967), a title that announces itself as “in the making,” that also homages Brecht, and where characters endlessly instruct one another about the possibilities of the revolution.

*Dialogue’s* language—it is entirely in Spanish, and Rodríguez Soltero never bothered to subtitle it—may have been intended to suggest other types of distance, not necessarily Brechtian this time: the distance between the Northern and Southern American hemispheres—that is, between the empire and its peripheries—but also between Latino and Anglo, insider and outsider. Only in the screening situation the Spanish-speaking Latino, habitual outsider in the space of the empire, might momentarily be the insider.

This militant Latinism shows as well in the conception of the film. When I talked to Rodríguez Soltero, he did not mention Godard as a direct inspiration, even though he admitted his admiration for him. Apart from Warhol, the main influences on *Dialogue* were Latin American filmmakers such as Glauber Rocha, Pereira dos Santos, and Gutiérrez Alea. *Dialogue* is more a Latin American project put together by Latin artists living in New York at the time than a New York underground film. The main links with the New York scene are performers Taylor Mead and Carlos Anduze. Mead makes an appearance toward the end, right before Ché’s death, playing an improbable CIA agent. He turns up with his transistor radio and listens starry-eyed to Carlos Gardel, with his back to Ché, who sits handcuffed in the back of the room. He then turns off the music and proceeds to read a text extolling the love of one’s rifle. When he’s finished, he turns on the radio again as the film goes out of focus. A less prominent underground performer was Carlos Anduze, who plays one of Ché’s killers and who had been featured in Gregory Markopoulos’s
The Illiac Passion (1964–67). Ché is played by Rolando Peña, best known nowadays for installations and performances denouncing the corruption of the Venezuelan oil industry and the centrality of oil in the nation’s economy. Peña spent long periods in New York in the late 1960s. Earlier in the decade he had been involved in experimental theatrical productions in Caracas in collaboration with playwright José Ignacio Cabrujas. The rest of the players were linked to the Young Lords, with whom Rodríguez Soltero made some newsreels (Young Lords Bulletin, nos. 1, 2, and 3) in the late 1960s and early 1970s.49

Something else that detaches the film from the underground scene is its screening history. Dialogue was included in a Filmmaker Cinematheque’s program on April 23, 1969, with Jaime Barrios’s Homenaje a Nicanor Parra (1969), another film in Spanish with no subtitles. Homenaje was “an intimate portrait” of the prominent Chilean poet Parra, who had visited New York earlier that year. The juxtaposition of Barrios and Rodríguez Soltero was appropriate. Born in Chile and relocated to New York in the mid-1960s, Barrios has had a long career making documentaries with a social consciousness and organizing and running film classes for Latino youths. (With this same objective, he eventually cofounded the Young Filmmakers Foundation, later known as Film/Video Arts.)50 His Film Club (1968), shown at the Sixth Annual New York Film Festival, chronicles the activities of a film workshop for Puerto Rican teenagers on the Lower East Side.

Dialogue was indifferently received in New York. Mekas reviewed it briefly in the Village Voice, found it “interesting,” and pronounced Taylor Mead “very good—at his best.”51 The film was promoted in France by Cahiers du cinéma critic Marie Meerson and by Cinematheque director Henri Langlois, who screened it in Paris and, later on, at the Cannes and Berlin film festivals.52 (In Berlin, the film crossed paths with Godard’s seldom seen Le gai savoir (1969), which was also shown at the Berlinale that year and has some similarities with Dialogue.) That Dialogue had little echo in New York is not surprising, and not only because of the language. While it anticipates the political turn of experimental U.S. film in the early 1970s—evident, for example, in John Jost’s Speaking Directly (1974), Robert Kramer’s Ice (1969), or in the work of the Newsreel units—it has much more in common with what was called at the time the New Latin American Cinema.

The fascination with Ché is present in such contemporary works as Alejandro Saderman’s Hombres del mal tiempo (Cuba, 1968), José Fraga’s La odisea del general José (Cuba, 1968) and Fernando Solanas and Horacio Gettino’s La hora de los hornos (Argentina, 1968). The first part of Solanas and Gettino’s groundbreaking
Neocolonialism and Violence is dedicated to Ché, abundantly quotes from his writings, and contains a lengthy close up of the face of the dead Cuban leader. From a more formalist perspective, the Brechtian quality of *Dialogue* has parallels in numerous Latin American titles that combine a left political perspective with experimental strategies—for example, *La hora de los hornos*, Nicolás Guillén’s *Coffea Arabiga* (Cuba, 1968), Gerardo Vallejo’s *El camino hacia la muerte del viejo Reales* (Argentina, 1971), Ugo Ulive’s *¡Basta!* (Venezuela, 1970), or Manuel de Pedro’s *Juan Vicente Gómez y su época* (Venezuela, 1975). While the Brechtianism of *Dialogue* was largely expressed through performance, these titles generated critical distance by more cinematic means: by montages of found images and music, intertitles, and an experimental use of sound.

Despite the coincidences, an important difference exists between Rodríguez Soltero’s work and that of his Latin American contemporaries. Political Latin American film of the late 1960s and early 1970s was not queer; rather, it was concerned with global politics, imperialism, dependence, and state violence. These concerns appear in Rodríguez Soltero’s later work, in the video *Despierta Boricua!* made for the United Nations Committee on Decolonization and in his *Young Lord Bulletins*. Rodríguez Soltero’s political turn perhaps brought about his eventual eclipse as a filmmaker. As a politically committed Latin artist, he may have felt that the queer underground was too evasive, which is why he moved sideways from it. But as a queer man, left political cinema may have felt too straight—despite the occasional homoerotic visual jokes in *Dialogue*. Separately, each type of film erased a fundamental part of who he was. At the time, it may have been impossible to bring together his two realms of interest—the macropolitics of anti-imperialism and the micropolitics of sexuality. Macropolitical activism gave short shrift to the oppression of queer sexuality, because more-urgent issues were often thought to be on the agenda. Consider Pier Paolo Pasolini’s trouble with the Italian Communist Party or Allen Ginsberg’s disastrous brushes against with Communist regimes in Cuba and Czechoslovakia, narrated by his biographer Barry Miles. Yet the camp rendition of politics as sexual farce, in Warhol’s and Tavel’s style, may not have been fully satisfying to many politically minded queers. Rodríguez Soltero’s attempt to manage a synthesis between these, at the time, divergent agendas may have estranged him from both the underground and the political scenes, which is, perhaps, why he eventually chose to drop out altogether. But his work, buried for decades, funny, articulate, and accomplished, remains a testimony to the complexities of the 1960s avant-garde and to his extraordinary gifts as a filmmaker.
Taken together, Mario Montez and Rodríguez Soltero force us to revise the accepted histories of Puerto Rican film and performance in New York City. These tend to start in the 1970s with the Nuyorican Poets Café, the television series *Realidades* (for WNET/Channel 13), and the social documentaries of Carlos de Jesús and of Beni Matías, but the accepted histories pass over the earlier, admittedly more complicated legacy of Montez and Rodríguez Soltero. As victims of historical amnesia, Montez and Soltero are not alone. Chon Noriega has noted a similar neglect of a late 1960s Chicano avant-garde—Ernie Palomino’s *My Trip in a ’52 Ford* (1966) or Severo Pérez’s *Mozo: An Introduction into the Duality of Orbital Indecision* (1968)—whose interracial, cross-cultural, aesthetic concerns did not accommodate the nationalist rhetoric (“for community, for identity”) of the Chicano movement. These avant-garde artists were swept aside by the biases of minority politics and community building, which, in their moment of emergence, tended to demand a testimonial art, representative of ethnic and national unities. These neglected artists should be rescued from oblivion on grounds other than just historical accuracy. Not only do they push back by a decade the emergence of Nuyorican film and performance. They are also extremely enabling examples for subsequent artists, because they show that minority expression need not be only “for community, for identity” but can also be for hybridity and flux. In this respect, Montez and Rodríguez Soltero are the unacknowledged predecessors of an entire generation of postmodern Latino creators—from Gómez Peña and González Torres to Luis Alfaro and Carmelita Tropicana—who since the early 1980s have dwelt on category crossing and have fused the avant-garde with ethnic, subcultural, and national concerns.

In addition, Montez and Rodríguez Soltero should prompt us to keep in mind the trans-American connections of the New York avant-garde. This trans-American quality is found not only in Latin American artists occasionally popping into the scene—artists such as Luis Ernesto Arocha, a Colombian experimental filmmaker whose work was occasionally screened at the Cinematheque alongside titles by Rodríguez Soltero or Piero Heliczer; or Brazilian Hélio Oiticica, who made films in New York in the early 1970s following the examples of Jack Smith and Andy Warhol. (Oiticica’s film *Manhattan* featured Mario Montez, and some of his installations homaged Luis Buñuel.) The trans-American quality of the underground is also seen in the way it traveled south and impacted Latin American cinema: Lionel Rogosin’s *On the Bowery* (1956), for example, directly influenced Cuban documentarist Oscar Valdés (*Escenas de los muelles*, 1970) and the Brazilian *cinema da rua*—a self-reflexive style of street documentary whose best example is Joao Batista de...
Andrade’s Migrantes (1972). Moreover, the ideas and example of the underground also had an important following in Mexico, in the criticism published in the journal Nuevo Cine and in the work of a group of no-budget filmmakers working in small formats (16 mm, 8 mm, and Super-8). (The most famous of these, Alejandro Jodorowski, burst into the U.S. midnight movie scene in 1970 with his lysergic epic El Topo.) These examples show the fusion of underground modes and concerns with multiple cultural practices and national affiliations. The flexibility of the underground as a mode of representation and style of production, together with its antinormative bent, accommodated a number of peripheral aesthetics and concerns and allowed peripheral artists and activists to articulate identities and discourses that were seldom possible in their native cultural repertoires. The crucial issue is not only the journey out—the dissemination of the underground from center to peripheries—but also the journey back: the way peripheral accents and ethnic constituencies became part of this aesthetic. Above all, the point to remember is that the New York queer underground occasionally put on a Spanish accent, and Latino concerns resonated at times through the queer underground.
Notes
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7. Smith, Andy Warhol’s Art and Films, 493.

8. This sketch seems to have been about Thomas Lanigan Schmidt, an artist and friend of Ludlam’s, who is rendered as a Puerto Rican, perhaps because of his Hispanophilia and his identification with Puerto Rican culture. My thanks to Marc Siegel for this suggestion. Charles Ludlam, “Mr. T., or el Pato,” in Ridiculous Theater, Scourge of Human Folly: The Essays and Opinions of Charles Ludlam (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1992).


23. Clipping File on Bill Vehr, Anthology Film Archives.
24. Clipping File on Bill Vehr, Anthology Film Archives.
25. Film-Makers Cooperative Catalogue, no. 7 (New York: Film-Makers Cooperative, 1989), 482.
27. Smith, Wait for Me, 28.

30. See Ken Jacobs’s testimony in Smith, Wait for Me, 162–163.


32. Undated flyer, Piero Heliczer clipping file, Anthology Film Archives.

33. My thanks to Ron Gregg for identifying Mario in the film.

34. Angell, 134.


40. Clipping File on Bill Vehr, Anthology Film Archives.

41. José Rodríguez Soltero, interview by author, 19 February 2006.

42. Kaufman, Ridiculous! 99. Kaufman cites the hand program for the premiere of Ludlam and Bill Vehr’s Turds in Hell (December 1966).

43. Luis Rafael Sánchez, La importancia de llamarse Daniel Santos (Hanover, NH: Ediciones del Norte, 1980), 45–46.

44. Sánchez, 47.


47. Fred MacDarrah, “American Flag Burned in Theater Spectacle,” The Village Voice, 14 April
1966, 6–7.

48. Hand program, Rodríguez Soltero File, Film-Makers’ Cooperative.
49. José Rodríguez Soltero, interview by author, 17 April 2006.
52. Rodríguez Soltero, interview, 17 April 2006.
53. Rodríguez Soltero, interview, 17 April 2006.
55. An example is Jiménez, “From the Margin to the Center,” an excellent account, but one whose focus on “the history, culture, and daily reality of the majority of Puerto Ricans” leaves out an important chapter in the history of Puerto Rican visual culture.
57. See, for example, José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
58. Undated Filmmakers’ Cinematheque program, Clipping File on Piero Heliczer, Anthology Film Archives.