

# *Alarma!*

## Mujercitos *Performing Gender in 1970s Mexico*

---

SUSANA VARGAS CERVANTES

**Abstract** In this essay, I analyze representative photographs of *mujercitos*' posing for *Alarma!*, contextualizing them through their labor as sex workers within the pigmentocratic system of Mexico. I read their gender performance as reflecting their desire to access class privilege, which in Mexico is inseparable from skin tonality. I argue that the photographs of *mujercitos* point to processes of subjectivation different from those outlined in prominent theories of performative gender/sex developed in Anglo North America, specifically the early work of Judith Butler.

**Keywords** *mujercitos*, *travesti*, gender performativity, *nota roja*, *Alarma!*, pigmentocracy

Lorena sits on a chair, her left arm lying softly over her purse on her lap while her right elbow rests on a desk. Her hand delicately holds her head. There is nothing shy about her: her strong features affirm her daring attitude. There is no option but to be captivated by Lorena's seductive gaze. Her penetrating look is directed at you. She is beautiful and this photograph shows it.

This black and white photograph (fig. 1) appeared on the back cover of issue 217 of *Alarma! Únicamente la verdad!* (*Alarma!* hereafter) on June 17, 1970 (Márquez 1970). *Alarma!* is the definitive example of *nota roja*,<sup>1</sup> a popular periodical genre characterized by its gruesome photographs of dead bodies. Yet Lorena is not pictured dead, burned, or mutilated. On the contrary, for twenty-three consecutive years (1963–1986) with a print run of half a million copies, *Alarma!* featured every month a photograph of a *mujercito* like Lorena.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I analyze representative photographs of *mujercitos*' posing for *Alarma!*, contextualizing them through their labor as sex workers within the pigmentocratic system of Mexico.<sup>3</sup> I read their gender performance as reflecting their desire to access class privilege, which in Mexico is inseparable from skin tonality, rather than their identification with hegemonic identities. I argue that the photographs of *mujercitos* point to processes of subjectivation different from those outlined in prominent theories of

performative gender/sex developed in Anglo North America, specifically the early work of Judith Butler.

Within the issue of *Alarma!* I began with, there is further a spread of photographs of Lorena. Two black and white photographs side by side show how Lorena wears her long black hair up in a ponytail or down over her shoulders. There is also a triptych of Lorena performing a very sexualized femininity, in poses: “flirting, suggestive and daring,” according to the captions. These photographs construct “a story of Lorena” that appears to belong more to a fashion magazine or a photo novella than to a *nota roja* periodical.



Figure 1. Es hombre, vive como mujer! Nací para amar chicos! Potros Editores S. A. de C. V. and *Alarma!*

In *Alarma!*'s July 1970 issue, another *mujercito*, La Queta, poses smiling happily at the camera (López García 1978). The novella narrated through these photographs similarly concerns performances of femininity. Queta wears a miniskirt highlighting her crossed, bare legs. The camera captures her profile while she sits on a chair, her hands resting on her lap. She is smoking, casually, as if distracted by engaging conversation. The caption reads: “She smokes.” In the last photograph, Queta stands up, holding a broom, posing with one knee bent while her hips slightly incline to her right in counterpoise. She smiles looking into the camera; the caption exclaims: “. . . and sweeps!” Queta performs both a sexualized and a traditional femininity.

Another back cover of *Alarma!* from August 1978 features the photograph of Claudia, captioned as “the most sensual of them all,” and provides a close up so that we can see Claudia’s crossed leg as she sits (Gutiérrez Valenzuela 1978). Through her poise before the camera, Claudia not only performs sexualized femininity but displays the femininity of a higher socioeconomic class. Claudia poses almost arrogantly, with back straight and elongated, recalling aristocratic women’s portraits.<sup>4</sup> With this photograph, Claudia provides herself with an

identity evoking what she might have (wanted to have) been, an aristocratic being photographed for the society pages.

Paulette's self-projection is similarly visible as she poses for *Alarma!*. "Paulette," "the sad one," strikes a pose evocative of movie star Dolores del Río, the first Latin American female star known in Hollywood (Gutiérrez Valenzuela 1978). Paulette poses for *Alarma!* holding her hand to her chest, looking into the distance, lamenting. Her sobriquet, "the sad one," seems to allude to the name of the most representative face of Mexico in Hollywood, Dolores, which literally translates as pain. As Dolores, Paulette performs a sexualized femininity and another social class, that of the movie star.

These and many other photographs of *mujercitos* enact what Cuauhtémoc Medina (1994: 1) notes in his analysis of the photographs of nineteenth-century prostitutes in Oaxaca, Mexico: "It is the realization of a desire: to not see yourself how you really are, but how you would have wanted to have been." Medina discusses these photographs as a theater of identity struggle in which the photograph's official function was to control sex workers through *identification* while sex workers, through posing and control over the camera, provided themselves with a different *identity*, an idealized version of themselves.

In the photographs described above, *mujercitos* posing for the camera of *Alarma!* provide for themselves an identity not of what they are but of what they might want to become. Lorena is a model for a high-end fashion magazine. Claudia is the wife of a high-class man who belongs to the cultural elite in Mexico; she entertains the upper classes in exclusive parties at her mansion. Paulette becomes, like Dolores del Río, one of the few Latin American movie stars to succeed in Hollywood, the greatest beauty of her time. Importantly, all of these aspirational identities are linked to class and skin tone.

Since Spanish colonization, skin color has been a marker of class in the pigmentocratic sociocultural system of Mexico: lighter skin tonalities are associated with the ruling European upper and middle classes, while darker tones are associated with indigenusness, with lower socioeconomic status, and with exposure to racism and labor discrimination (Feminías 2009; Moreno Figueroa 2010; Villarreal 2010). Whiteness marks the space of privilege and is a widely desired subject position (Moreno Figueroa 2010). *Mujercitos'* gender performance in these photographs reflects their desire to access a privileged class/skin tonality position. The names *mujercitos* use underscore this desire. Names like Odette and Paulette sound French, which in Mexico allows *mujercitos* to lay claim to a Europeaness that makes them sound better, whiter, more distinguished than do Spanish names. In this way *mujercitos'* self-presentation in *Alarma!* points to a process of subjectivation intersected as much by class/skin tonalities as by gender/sexual identification.

It is conventional in North America for this kind of intersection to be theorized as it was by Judith Butler (1993: 130) in her analysis of the film *Paris Is Burning*, where she interprets the performance of male-bodied femininity as a “vehicle for the phantasmic transformation of [the] nexus of race and class.” Butler describes that transformation as “the phantasmic promise of rescue from poverty, homophobia and racist delegitimation.” and connects it to the desire to “become real, . . . a real woman.” But it is important that *mujercitos* are not necessarily performing femininity out of a desire to be or become “real women,” nor performing Europeanness out of a desire to be or become white. Rather, *mujercitos*’ self-presentation performs the desire to occupy the spaces of privilege that whiteness offers in Mexico.

I contend this because the photographs of *mujercitos* like Claudia and Lorena are usually accompanied by text suggesting that they are sex workers. For example, Lorena will “look for love” on the “highways.” In another *Alarma!* article, *mujercitos* are described as “men but they sell their caresses as if they were women” (Rámirez Flores 1972). Other articles work almost as classified advertisements, giving specific dates and times at which one can find the depicted *mujercitos*, though there is almost never any explicit mention of sex work or prostitution.

So if I argue that *mujercitos* might not want to “become real women” this is because their labor, as sex workers, doesn’t necessarily benefit from such becoming. In her work on *travestis* and transgender sex workers in Mexico, Debra Castillo (2006: 11) found that it is more profitable to fulfill a common fantasy among Mexican men, that is, “to have sex with a woman that has a penis.” Similarly, work on *travesti* sex workers found that many Mexican men hold a fantasy known as the *macho probado*, to take on the “passive” role during sex and be penetrated.<sup>5</sup>

Many Latin American researchers note that although many men have sex with men, they do not self-identify as “homosexual,” “gay,” or “bisexual” (Carrier 1995; Nesving 2001; Núñez Noriega 1999; Prieur 1998). Their gender/sexual identity is not identical to their sexual practice. Indeed identity and practice in Mexico do not necessarily express continuity and coherent relations between gender/sex, sexual orientation, practice, and desire but, instead, are deeply entangled with social stratification.

Given the centrality of questions of economic survival and social stratification in Mexico, labor is a major site of contention. Middle-class and working-class subjects have very different employment options and correspondingly different self-presentations. For people with peripheral sexualities within middle-class spaces, gender presentation follows a normative relation of coherence between gender and sex; regardless of sexual orientation, men look masculine and

women look feminine. *Vestidas* and *travestis* from the lower classes normally work in beauty salons or as sex workers. Self-identified “gay” subjects are more often middle or upper class and much less effeminate. On the other hand, in lower- and working-class sectors, gender presentation has an inconsistent relation to sex or sexual orientation: many more women can be masculine and many more men are feminine, independent of sexual orientation and practice, without rendering them unintelligible as subjects.

In the postcolonial pigmentocratic sociocultural system of Mexico, questions of subjective intelligibility must take into consideration the ways in which class/skin tonality is deeply entangled with labor. In *Alarma!*, *mujercitos* negotiated this system by enacting their aspirations through photographs, showing themselves as they wished to have been, performing sexualized femininity, and inhabiting spaces of socioeconomic privilege, while maintaining their erotic capital as sex workers. These photographs show how in Mexico class/skin-tonality relations play a determining role in the constitution of subjectivity in the same way gender/sex does elsewhere.

---

**Susana Vargas Cervantes** is an Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council postdoctoral student at the Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. Her most recent publications include “¿Saliendo del clóset gay, maricón o queer?” (2014), “Retablos: Bodies and Affects in Subversion” (2010), and “Performing Mexicanidad: Criminality and *lucha libre*” (2010).

## Notes

1. *Nota roja* is a Mexican cultural tradition associated with lower socioeconomic classes. Will Straw (2011: 53) defines *nota roja* as “the Mexican term for the chronicling of violence and crime” that “has come to stand more generally for the variety of ways in which crime may be narrated within popular cultural forms.” The term designates periodicals with gruesome textual and photographic content, newspaper sections that deal with violent events, or sensationalist television, tainted with morbidity.
2. The term *mujercito*, used by *Alarma!* as a synonym for “effeminate man,” plays with gender through a grammatical feminization of the male subject. Grammatically, the term *mujercitos* masculinizes the noun used only to name females, *mujer*. I suggest that the term *mujercitos* is feminizing, not the grammatical subject, but the subject that has been assigned “male” sex at birth. I refrain from ascribing a particular gender/sexual identity to the *mujercitos* but ground my theoretical analysis through the identity of *travesti* (as opposed to transvestite, transsexual, or cross-dresser, as they originate in a different historical and cultural context). *Travesti* references not only gender identity but also a political and activist identity, one seeking to become the subject of law. The term *travesti* designates “persons that having being assigned the masculine gender at birth have chosen

to identify themselves in different versions of femininity and who may or may not surgically or hormonally modify their bodies” (Cabral and Viturro 2006: 270). By posing in these photographs *mujercitos* provided themselves the feminine subjectivity that the text and homophobic society denied them. Historically peripheral sexual subjects in Mexico have reappropriated denigrating terms to empower themselves linguistically: my use intends to extend and recognize the resistance *mujercitos* enacted through photographs.

3. This article is an excerpt from my doctoral project, which examines photographs of *mujercitos* in the periodical *Alarma!* between 1963, when the first issue appeared, and 1991, when *Alarma!* was censored by the government for five years.
4. The story recounts that before the photograph was taken, Claudia asked the photographer to wait while she touched up her makeup. Claudia wanted to shine in the photo since “her husband was going to see it.”
5. For a further discussion on *travestis* and transgender and transexual sex workers in Mexico or Argentina, see Castillo 2006; Maffia 2006.

## References

- Butler, Judith. 1993. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex.”* New York: Routledge.
- Cabral, Mauro, and Paula Viturro. 2006. “(Trans)sexual Citizenship in Contemporary Argentina.” In *Transgender Rights*, edited by Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter, 262–73. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Carrier, Joseph. 1995. *De los otros: Intimacy and Homosexuality among Mexican Men.* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Castillo, Debra A. 2006. “Violencia y trabajadores sexuales travestis y transgéneros en Tijuana.” *Debate feminista*, no. 33: 7–20.
- Femenías, María Luisa. 2009. “Género y feminismo en América Latina.” *Debate feminista* 40: 42–74.
- Gutiérrez Valenzuela, Antonio. 1978. “La policía les interrumpió la vil orgía! ‘Mujercitos’ presos!” *Alarma!*, August, 39.
- López García, H. 1970. “Se viste como las damas y le encantan los hombres! Quiere ser Mujercita!” *Alarma!*, June, 35–37, 40.
- Maffia, Diana. 2006. *Diálogo prostitución/trabajo sexual: Las protagonistas hablan.* Buenos Aires: Instituto Hanna Arendt.
- Márquez, Enrique. 1970. “Es hombre, vive como mujer! Nací para amar chicos!” *Alarma!*, July, 1, 40.
- Medina, Cuauhtémoc. 1994. “¿Identidad o identificación? La fotografía y la distinción de las personas. Un caso Oaxaqueño.” In *Arte, Historia e Identidad en América: Visiones comparativas. XVII coloquio internacional de historia del arte*, vol. 2, edited by Gustavo Curiel, Renato González Mello, and Juana Gutiérrez Haces, 577–98. Mexico City: Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma.
- Moreno Figueroa, Mónica. 2010. “Distributed Intensities: Whiteness, *Mestizaje* and the Logics of Mexican Racism.” *Ethnicities* 10, no. 3: 387–401.
- Nesving, Martin. 2001. “The Complicated Terrain of Latin American Homosexuality.” *Hispanic American Historical Review* 81, nos. 3–4: 689–729.
- Núñez Noriega, Guillermo. 1999. *Sexo entre varones: Poder y resistencia en el campo sexual*, 2nd ed. Mexico City: Coordinación de Humanidades, Programa Universitario de Estudios de Género, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, Universidad Autónoma de México.

- Priour, Annick. 1998. *Mema's House, Mexico City: On Transvestites, Queens and Machos*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rámirez Flores, Francisco. 1972. "¡Que vergüenza para guadalajara! Son hombres y venden sus caricias como si fueran mujeres!" *Alarma!*, July, 40.
- Straw, Will. 2011. "Nota roja and journaux jaunes: Popular crime periodicals in Quebec and Mexico." In *Aprehendiendo al delincuente: sociedad y medios en Norteamérica*, edited by Graciela Martínez Zalce, Will Straw, and Susana Vargas Cervantes, 53–67. Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México/Media@McGill.
- Villarreal, Andrés. 2010. "Stratification by Skin Colour in Contemporary Mexico." *American Sociological Review* 5, no. 75: 652–78.