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CHOTEO CUBANO: HUMOR AS A CRITICAL TOOL IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY
CUBAN THEATER

by

REBECCA L. SALOIS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Latin American, Iberian and Latino Cultures
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City
University of New York

2017

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Latin American, Iberian and Latino Cultures in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Choteo Cubano: Humor as a Critical Tool in Twentieth-Century Cuban Theater

by

Rebecca L. Salois

Advisor: Jean Graham-Jones

This project analyzes the incorporation of choteo in specific Cuban theater texts written during three distinct periods in twentieth-century Cuban history, all of which coincide with specific moments of social, political, and/or economic unrest or transition. Choteo in the theater has served as a tool to demonstrate discontent and frustration with authority figures in various contexts. As that need has altered over time, so too has the approach that playwrights have taken to speak out about these issues. I suggest that by responding to changing circumstances with choteo, confronting a difficult situation is more palatable to audiences or readers than using a more serious approach.

I investigate humor theories from Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud, and Peter McGraw, along with analyses of choteo by Jorge Mañach, Gustavo Pérez Firmat, and Narciso Hidalgo, to consider how and why choteo is used, and the effects of its use. I put forth a definition of choteo that suits its application in literary texts, and I demonstrate that choteo in the theater exists in various forms. While this is not an exhaustive study of choteo in the theater, a close reading of the selected plays provides various examples of the ways in which choteo has been applied in theatrical texts in order to express discontent with specific situations.

Chapter one examines the years following Machado's dictatorship and investigates the uses of choteo directed at social classes and social changes related to race, gender, and class. The three plays selected from this period are *Y quisio más la vida* (1934), by José Cid Pérez, *Junto al río* (1938), by Luis Baralt, and *El velorio de Pura* (1941), by Flora Díaz Parrado.

Chapter two analyzes the use of choteo to discuss political unrest during the early years of Castro's Revolution and the texts from these years demonstrate a lack of change and a fear of repetition of previous political situations in the country. The plays from this period include *El flaco y el gordo* (1959), by Virgilio Piñera, *La paz en el sombrero* (1961), by Gloria Parrado, and *La muerte del Ñeque* (1963), by José Triana.

Chapter three considers choteo in the theater during the Special Period and reflects the economic experiences of Cuban society at that moment. Due to their specific socio-economic foci, I have elected to analyze *Manteca* (1993), by Alberto Pedro Torriente, *Laberinto de lobos* (1994), by Miguel Terry, and *Vereda tropical* (1994), by Joaquín Miguel Cuartas Rodríguez.

I aim to demonstrate that choteo in the theater, specifically that used in plays written during moments of great change in twentieth-century Cuba, serves a greater purpose than simply making the spectator or reader laugh. It is my intention not only to discuss the myriad examples of choteo in certain Cuban plays, but also to explain its function in these works.

While choteo has not necessarily brought about direct or immediate cultural shifts, I believe that it has the potential to aid in the ever-transforming face of Cuban society. Whether it serves as a mere form of temporary escapism, as a means to openly effect change, or something in between, choteo plays a significant role in both mirroring and influencing Cuban society.

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Introduction: Choteo – A Cuban Humor

In this dissertation, I analyze three different periods in Cuban history, all of which coincide with specific moments of social, political, and/or economic unrest. I contend that, while the humor is present throughout many periods in Cuban history, there are surges in the use of choteo during these times, and to demonstrate this I look at plays written and/or produced during each period. The chapters in this dissertation are based on historical divisions of time, and for each time-period I have chosen a blend of well- and lesser-known playwrights in order to create a more complete perspective on who employed choteo and in what contexts. Some of these plays were staged shortly after they were written, yet others were published but never performed. Many of these plays received awards or were granted honorable mentions in various theater competitions. While this is not an exhaustive study of choteo in the theater during these specific time periods, a close reading of the selected texts provides various examples of the ways in which choteo has been applied to express discontent with specific situations.

The introduction to this study will provide definitions and an explanation of choteo. This will be followed by an analysis and brief discussion of the history of choteo in pre-twentieth-century Cuban theater. I will then address the transformations of the uses of the humor, in particular from the nineteenth century into the twentieth century, and its functions in the twentieth century. This historical overview and analysis of the ever-changing application of choteo serve to set up the remainder of the dissertation. I will conclude the introduction with a brief rationale for each of the plays chosen for this study.

This study addresses the use of choteo in moments of cultural change that occurred in three distinct moments of Cuban history. In the 1930s, after the fall of Gerardo Machado, social changes relating to race, gender, and social class played a role in the ways in which choteo was

expressed in the theater. In the 1960s, with the rise of Fidel Castro's revolution, the political atmosphere dictated the applications of choteo in the theater. And in the 1990s, with Cuba's entrance into the Special Period, economic instability was a topic frequently addressed via choteo. Although each chapter deals with one overarching issue or concern relevant to the time, there is much overlap among these three themes. I chose each of these moments because they represent moments of great change in the twentieth century during which Cubans can be seen to be questioning or reevaluating their identity. The plays that I will analyze in this study each speak to this reflection of a changing cultural environment and the reactions to those changes.

The conclusion to this study considers how choteo continues to address these issues of the twentieth century even into the twenty-first century. Through presenting connections among the types of choteo used during these three periods, it is my intention to show how the theater serves as a highly effective medium for the expression of choteo. I will also consider how effective choteo is in evoking social, political, and/or economic changes, or if it merely serves as a reflection of Cuban culture.

By Way of Definitions

One could consider *choteo* a Caribbean concept, but its use in Cuba has its own meaning and style.¹ According to Fernando Ortiz, choteo is a Cuban expression of unclear origin that connotes speaking, throwing, tearing, spying, watching, playing, and pranking (212-13). Jorge Mañach defines Cuban choteo as “no tomar nada en serio” and “tirarlo todo a relajo,” and he describes one who uses choteo (*el choteador*) as a person to whom “a nadie le concede importancia” and who “todo lo echa a broma” (57). Julio Martínez suggests that “*choteo*, often

¹ Since I define the term in detail in this section, I will not further italicize the word choteo or the verb forms associated with it (chotear and choteando) throughout this study except where it was italicized in a direct citation.

compared with the Andalusian picaresque mode, is that intrinsic ingredient of Cuban culture which purports harmless verbal mockery and disdain for authority as well as a certain bittersweet reticence toward life's adversities" (324). But choteo is even more than this: Paul Allatson, in *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies*, states that "*choteo* can at once mock or satirize agents and forms of dominant culture and take the form of a menacing countercolonial mimicry of those agents and forms. Choteo... becomes a key strategy for self-assertion, identity construction, and critique of dominant cultural protocols..." (67). Choteo allows the user to be sincere or to speak frankly, but it can also serve to hide the user's true feelings. Since choteo has historically been considered a form of humor associated with the verbal or semi-verbal, its appearance in the theater is not surprising.

Choteo's presence in Cuban theater dates to at least the nineteenth century and, arguably, even as early as the colonial period. It demonstrates a simultaneous lack of respect for and criticism of authority while containing tones of resignation. And although the target or victim of choteo may not appreciate the choteador's humor, its application in the theater is one that is seemingly understood and enjoyed by the audience with whom it is shared. Choteo is a complicated, plurivalent term. Its use reveals that the speaker does not take anything seriously, that their natural enemy is order, and that they deny or negate the role and importance of hierarchies. As a general rule, then, choteo is meant to discredit the other and reduce or humiliate the supposed greatness of its target. Choteo can be directed at one or more persons to express tensions or can be used against an individual, group, or situation as a form of challenge. Choteo in the theater can exist between characters or can occur beyond the text. In these latter instances, the choteo originates with the playwright and can either be directed at the audience (i.e., the

audience is the target) or against an outside authority that the audience should recognize (i.e., the government or another institutional entity is the target).

The use of choteo in Cuban theater during the twentieth century is frequently encountered in times of unrest or transition during which Cuba can be seen as reassessing its national identity. I argue that, at these moments, choteo serves as an important critical tool to focus on the social, political, and/or economic changes and uncertainties in Cuba. I refer to this literary form of choteo as intellectual choteo.² This particular choteo has the potential to function as an instrument or tool for transformation in Cuban society. And while it can be argued as to whether it is successful in affecting or altering cultural norms, choteo often questions powers of authority as well as the types of change, the effectiveness of change, or the lack of change at hand. At the very least, choteo can be beneficial in that it attempts to oppose the preconceived national consciousness of the ruling classes and instead posits an alternative national consciousness.

Historically, there have been two major models for the use of choteo.³ The first is racial and discriminatory. This includes the use of caricatures and the ridicule of people of other races, particularly black Cubans. It has been used by those who reject people of other cultures when they did not understand, or even feared, those cultures. The second is a choteo that is subversive and anti-hierarchical in nature. This has its origins in black Cubans who used choteo to ridicule white Cubans to their faces. This rebellious form of choteo is still prevalent today and is seen, I maintain, quite clearly in Cuban theater throughout the twentieth century. While the racial

² While I acknowledge that this term could be considered problematic since it might be construed as suggesting that only someone with superior intellect would understand this humor, I use the term as a reference to the way in which choteo can appeal or engage the intellect of any individual. My focus on how these plays intentionally use choteo to address changing cultural conditions suggests that there is a creative and rational decision behind its application in the theater.

³ These models have been described in one form or another by various Cuban scholars. Mañach describes the two forms in detail in *Indagación del choteo*, but they are also mentioned by Gustavo Pérez Firmat in *Literature and Liminality* and by Narciso Hidalgo in *Choteo: Irreverencia y humor*. Jill Lane also takes note of these applications of choteo in *Blackface Cuba*, specifically as they relate to the bufo tradition and blackface theater.

element of this choteo continues to exist in certain situations, there is more emphasis on class distinction between the choteadores and their targets. Choteo of this subversive nature in the twentieth century often targets the government and governing officials.

Since intellectual choteo is a humor that reveals the tensions among social, political, or economic sectors, it thus responds to the cultural gaps within these same sectors. It can serve to oppose the discourse of power within Cuba and has an anti-hierarchical and critical voice. Through mockery, choteo criticizes the system and demonstrates an individual or group's discontent and frustration with the government and those in control. Choteo speaks to class conflicts and is a response to corruption, nepotism, and other cultural struggles.

Jorge Mañach, in his original conference essay on choteo from 1928, perceived choteo as a negative form of humor that could potentially provoke the downfall of Cuban society. He clarified the idea of not taking anything seriously by specifying that “el choteo no toma en serio nada de lo que generalmente se tiene por serio” (*Indagación* 16). Mañach further explained, “Es evidente que no tomar nada en serio no quiere decir necesariamente que se desconozca o niegue, en el fuero interior, la existencia de cosas serias, sino que, de reconocerlas, se adopta también hacia ellas una actitud irrespetuosa” (17). Mañach understood that there were different categories of choteo: “Lo que más cierto parece es que hay un choteo ligero, sano, casi puramente exterior, que obedece principalmente a vicios o faltas de atención derivadas de la misma psicología criolla, y otro choteo, más incisivo y escéptico, perversión acaso del anterior y originado de una verdadera quiebra del sentido de autoridad...” (18). It was this second form of choteo that concerned Mañach more.

And although his opinions and criticism of choteo evolved over time, Mañach's initial judgment is important because it demonstrates the critical assessment of the concept at the start

of the twentieth century, as well as a historical understanding of the interpretations of its uses. According to Narciso J. Hidalgo, Mañach spoke poorly of choteo primarily for racial reasons. He focused on the African elements and ignored the transcultural characteristics of the humor.⁴ Mañach believed that development, civility, and modernity were necessary for Cuba but that these could only come from Europe (*Irreverencia y humor* 20). Although I recognize that Mañach's perspectives on choteo are largely outdated, it is necessary to understand his outlook on the humor as he was one of the first to speak in depth on the subject.

According to Mañach, choteo converts itself into a perversion of values that undermines authority and subverts hierarchies. This, Mañach indicated, would be a factor in preventing the advancement of Cuban society (*Indagación* 22-23). It does not appear that he saw choteo as having any real critical value but rather only as a grotesque joke. While he recognized that choteo was a Cuban characteristic, he was not satisfied with accepting that at face value. As Rosario Rexach explains, "En *Indagación del choteo*... [Mañach] hace un estudio psicológico y sociológico de esta manifestación del carácter cubano. Analiza cuidadosamente lo que es el respeto y ve en el choteo una esencial falta del mismo" (10). However, his initial conclusion, that this lack of respect would be one of the contributing factors to the downfall of Cuban society, seems an exaggeration. It does not fully analyze the variety of contexts in which choteo exists. Mañach acknowledges that choteo is a coping mechanism, but does not see this as a positive use of the humor. Mañach sought a "high-culture" approach to advancing Cuban society, and choteo did not fit into his particular vision. Rexach also acknowledges that Mañach's perspectives

⁴ According to Hidalgo, Mañach "intentó crear una plataforma que arremetiera contra la cultura de raíces africanas, porque su concepción de la cubanía tenía que tener raíces europeas. Por lo tanto, todas las manifestaciones culturales que estuviesen permeadas de raíces africanas eran un síntoma de barbarie e incultura, y solo podían ser arrinconadas por una cultura elitista eurocéntrica" (20). If Mañach were to acknowledge the blend of European and African characteristics that made choteo the humor it was, he would have to admit that the culture he valued was not as pure as he might have liked.

regarding choteo changed over the course of his lifetime; although he never officially supported the use of the Cuban humor, later in his life Mañach no longer saw choteo as an immediate threat to Cuban society.⁵

Decades later, in the 1980s, Gustavo Pérez Firmat analyzed choteo in his book, *Literature and Liminality Festive Readings in the Hispanic Tradition*. Pérez Firmat asserts that “choteo is a flank attack on society’s structures and strictures, a subversion of the social order” (*Literature and Liminality* xv). Even if this may be true, I contend that subversion is not always negative. Sometimes the social order must be inverted, and choteo is one tool that has the potential to aid in such inversion. Stating that “choteo does not seem to be a topic that deserves concentrated scrutiny,” Pérez Firmat admits that “it is an elusive phenomenon more easily recognized than defined” (53). This explains why the definitions and perspectives on the humor vary depending on the specific contexts. Pérez Firmat also identifies two types of choteo: toxic and benign. With toxic choteo, the choteador “finds himself constitutionally incapable of having any concept of what authority is,” while benign choteo “consists in a selective disrespect for those kinds of authority that one thinks illegitimate” (54-55). In this study, the characters and the playwrights all engage in what Pérez Firmat considers benign choteo. It is not that they are unable to recognize authority figures, it is that they choose to subvert them in whatever way possible.

The most recent analysis of choteo in literature is found in Narciso J. Hidalgo’s 2012 monograph *Choteo: Irreverencia y humor en la cultura cubana*. Hidalgo’s perspective lines up

⁵ The biggest difference in content occurs between the second and third editions of the essay. It is this third edition that I cite throughout this study. In an author’s note at the beginning of this edition, Mañach states, “Aunque no gusto de andar retocando viejos escritos míos, esta vez me ha parecido conveniente hacerlo, podando aquí y allá tal o cual superfluidad, precisando algunos conceptos y añadiendo una breve nota para sugerir, con la perspectiva de hoy (1955), hasta qué punto hemos rebasado ya el choteo como hábito o actitud generalizada. Tal vez sigan conservando validez, sin embargo, mis observaciones sobre los rasgos peculiares y más estables de la psicología cubana. En determinada época, ellos proveyeron los mecanismos propicios para el tipo de expansión o de reacción que el choteo representó y que, con menos ubicuidad, representa todavía” (11).

most closely with my assessment of the humor and with how I will apply the use of choteo as important to the theater. Hidalgo also acknowledges two types of choteo: one which is racist and discriminatory, and one which is subversive and anti-hierarchical. Even though these categories overlap somewhat with the assessments made by Mañach and Pérez Firmat, Hidalgo's perspective allows for a more positive critical assessment of the latter. He argues that subversive choteo can also be liberating and suggests that the humor may be used to fight off the sadness of one's situation. He further indicates that "sería un error reducir la actitud de chotear a las que se conocen como 'cortar leva' y 'dar cuero,' porque estas, generalmente, adquieren sentido cuando se refieren a una persona. Sin embargo, uno puede chotear a una persona, pero de igual modo chotear una decisión política, un evento social o una consigna ideológica" (*Irreverencia y humor* 43). There is more to choteo than simply not taking anything seriously or poking fun at everything. As Hidalgo confirms, "Es decir, el carácter inclusivo del choteo tiene un campo de significación mayor. Podemos, pues, inferir que el uso del choteo puede ser entendido como consecuencia lógica de factores sociales, políticos y culturales" (44). I would add economic factors to Hidalgo's list, although, without a doubt, all overlap in one form or another.

Hidalgo not only begins to redefine how to look at choteo critically but he also applies this approach to art and literature. Hidalgo's study provides various examples of novels, periodicals, paintings, sculptures, and other forms of art. While he mentions a few instances of choteo in reference to the bufo theater tradition, Hidalgo does not go into great detail about them (*Irreverencia y humor* 16, 54). It is my objective to begin to fill this gap. My dissertation intends to show that choteo in the theater is an effective and relevant means to expressing disapproval of a given social, political, and/or economic situation in Cuba. This study demonstrates that a number of twentieth-century Cuban playwrights have used choteo as more than a way of

resigning themselves to a given situation; they include choteo in their plays as a means of speaking out against the resignation that already exists and, potentially, calling for change. This study adds to the scholarship that defends the use of choteo as an important and subversive literary form of humor that opposes the discourse of power in Cuba. It is vital to mention that I do not believe that all Cuban plays from the twentieth century use choteo, nor that all of those that do use choteo do so to speak out against the evolving conditions of the country. I do, however, insist that this particular application of choteo exists for a specific reason and that the function of the humor is quite different from that of past uses of choteo in Cuban theater.

In Relation to Other Humor

Humor is directly connected with identity, be that of the individual or of the society at large. In the case of choteo, it is intrinsically related to Cuban identity. Choteo is very clearly a part of the “habla popular” in Cuba, and although it has historically been considered a lower form of humor by such critics as Mañach, it is undoubtedly an element of the Cuban character. What is it then about choteo that separates it from other types of humor? Humor has often been employed to speak out against societal ills, but the resignation apparent in choteo differentiates it from other forms. On the one hand, choteo in its everyday use often demonstrates an acceptance of the current position of oneself or that of society; on the other hand, and particularly in a literary sense, intellectual choteo draws attention to social, political, and/or economic ills and perhaps even has the intention of initiating change. In order to better understand choteo, it helps to first consider some of the other ways in which humor has been analyzed.

Humor is nuanced, and the study of it must consider its many variations and the differing reactions to it. Henri Bergson and Sigmund Freud looked at humor at the turn of the twentieth

century. Bergson's focus was primarily on laughter, but in order to study laughter he also had to study humor, the comic, and other causes of laughter. Freud considered humor through the lens of the unconscious. From a twenty-first-century perspective, their research seems somewhat antiquated. Both Bergson and Freud focus on humor from Western-European cultures. How then do their studies relate to choteo? What are some universal elements (both geographical and temporal) that would apply to this particularly Cuban humor? Little of their analyses focuses on the use of humor to elicit change, although, relevant to this study, Bergson does consider the art and application of humor in the theater.

When Bergson applies his study of laughter and the comic to theater and the stage, he states, "Assuming that the stage is both a magnified and a simplified view of life, we shall find that comedy is capable of furnishing us with more information than real life..." (67). Theater frequently provides clues to the world around us, and Cuban theater is no exception. Choteo speaks of the realities in Cuban culture while presenting itself as humorous banter. The Cuban playwright often uses choteo to create suggestions and simultaneously convey the seriousness of a given situation. Understanding the inferences in the specific choteo allows audiences to better recognize and comprehend the message behind the humor. Bergson asserts that "comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again. It takes note of similarities. It aims at placing types before our eyes" (163). In each of the plays analyzed in this study, the characters are based on cultural types, and the humor lies in the audience's recognition of these types. However, Bergson also argues that comic stage representations are simply intended to entertain and nothing more. This is where I disagree: when choteo is combined with stage representation, it brings together comedy and drama and does more than simply entertain. More importantly, it has the potential to initiate audience reflection. The question remains as to

whether this type of theater is effective in evoking change, but there is no question that comic characters can do more than simply entertain.

The audience may attempt to hide behind the fictitious elements of these plays, but reality is where choteo finds its source of power. Bergson explains, “The reasonings at which we laugh are those we know to be false, but which we might accept as true were we to hear them in a dream” (187). Although there is some logic to this statement, I argue that, in the case of choteo, the opposite may also be true: the reasonings at which we laugh are those we know to be *true*, but perhaps wish were false, or part of a dream. While the plays in this study are works of fiction, they reflect the truths that existed in everyday Cuba at those times. Truth lies in the humor of these fictional works.

While choteo may cause the audience to laugh, it should also make them reflect upon their own role in the situation. Authority figures are often the target of choteo in these plays, but so too are the spectators/readers. The complacency with the changes taking place, or needing to take place, in their country is the target of choteo as well. According to Bergson, “By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness” (197). Here, I would replace the word society with playwright. The playwrights in this study seem to acknowledge the liberties taken with society in a way that society itself seems unwilling to openly recognize. They both cause their audiences to laugh and make them the target of the laughter. Choteo, at least as it is applied in the theater, is a humor that expresses an understanding of people and their circumstances. Choteo at a social level must show something that resonates with the audience. The choteador in these instances must have an understanding of Cuban society and the individuals within it.

One of the limitations of Freud's analysis of humor is that his definitions and descriptions of "jokes" do not take into consideration the subtleties of different time periods and cultures nor their idiosyncratic approaches to jokes and humor. However, he makes some general statements that one can apply to the use of choteo in Cuban jokes and Cuban humor. Freud claims that "only jokes that have a purpose run the risk of meeting with people who do not want to listen to them" (107). Intellectual choteo has a purpose. The purpose of choteo is to criticize, to discredit the other, and to reduce or humiliate the supposed greatness of its target. Choteo and the choteador reveal tensions among social, political, economic, or cultural sectors and, in doing so, may encounter people who do not accept the humor. Choteo in the theater has the potential to do more than just make people laugh because it often promotes a critical point of view. Each text in this study responds to important topical issues of the day. The use of this humor by the playwrights to address these concerns directly connects the relationship between topicality and humor as described by Freud (151).

Not everyone will find all choteo humorous. Each individual will react differently to the situation being presented. General audiences may accept the choteo within a particular text or production, but authority figures may react differently. Choteo in the plays I have chosen for this study is a critical choteo, that is, a choteo that uses humor to castigate a given situation, which can be somewhat controversial. When leadership is the target of choteo, it can sometimes result in censorship of the humor. This censorship can be either explicit or implicit and has played an important role in which plays were made available to the Cuban public.⁶ Audiences may

⁶ Explicit censorship refers to state mandated censorship. This form of censorship is more susceptible to vulnerability as it introduces the specifically censored work to the public by simply stating that the work is censored. Implicit censorship "refers to implicit operations of power that rule out in unspoken ways what will remain unspeakable" (Butler 130). For further reading on the various forms of censorship in the theater, see Roberto Hozven's "Censura, autocensura y contracensura: Reflexiones acerca de un simposio," Judith Butler's *Excitable Speech*, and Jean Graham-Jones's *Exorcising History Argentine Theater under Dictatorship*.

appreciate and relate to the humor, but they may have limited access to the material due to a lack of publication or production of the works in question.

Although certain elements of their humor theories are relevant, I recognize that, overall, Bergson and Freud's analyses are quite limited due to their early twentieth-century, European viewpoints. To evaluate humor as it applies to Cuban theater *throughout* the twentieth century, I turn to a more recent humor study. In 2014, Peter McGraw and Joel Warner published *The Humor Code: A Global Search for What Makes Things Funny*. The authors first discuss different humor theories throughout history, from Aristotle, Plato and the superiority theory, to Freud and the relief theory, and to Pascal and the incongruity theory. While each of these theories addresses certain forms of humor, none fully explains why people find different things funny.⁷ Using Thomas Veatch's humor theory as a point of departure, McGraw develops what he calls the "benign violation theory" as a way to analyze humor.⁸ He asserts that "humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign)" (McGraw 10).

McGraw applies his theory to many forms of humor worldwide, but he never addresses Cuba or choteo. I, however, believe that his theory bears application to choteo. Is there something seemingly wrong, unsettling, or threatening about choteo? Yes. Is there also something acceptable or safe? Definitely. Choteo is a violation, but it is relatively benign because it is accepted that little can be done to change the violation. There are nevertheless certain exceptions to this rule. When the government or an authority figure is the victim of

⁷ The superiority theory can be applied to teasing and slapstick comedy, the relief theory works for dirty jokes, and the incongruity theory is especially useful for jokes with punch lines (McGraw 6-8).

⁸ According to McGraw, Veatch's theory, the N+V Theory, states that V is the violation of a subjective moral principle and N is normality (10). McGraw decides to pick up this theory and expound upon it in a search to define and describe reactions to humor of all forms across the globe.

choteo, the violation seems to outweigh the benign. McGraw expounds on his theory by suggesting that when a joke targets an individual or their beliefs, it is considered less benign to that person than to those who do not share the same opinions.⁹

Humor can be a social force, and choteo, in particular, can be a Cuban social force. While it could be considered a form of dark humor or black humor, choteo in Cuba is unique to the Cuban experience. Although choteo exists in other places (most notably, by Cubans in exile), choteo on the island reflects the Cuban situation from within the Cuban context. McGraw maintains that “comedy... depends on context. Creating humor is a delicate operation built on layers of shared knowledge, assumptions, and innuendo. Remove one piece, and it all falls apart” (128). The removal of one of these pieces does not render the humor incomprehensible to outsiders, but it does affect the degree to which the humor will be appreciated, especially if the target lacks one of these shared layers.

Choteo is often a response to suffering. It demonstrates that laughter helps people escape their problems. Interestingly, intellectual choteo achieves this by focusing on these uncertain circumstances. As McGraw contends, “We laugh loudest at the most arousing humor attempts, the stuff that’s laced with a bit of danger. To come up with the best comedy, we have to skirt ever closer to the realm of tragedy, hurt, and pain. For some people, the result will hit that perfect, hilarious sweet spot. For others, it goes over the line” (147). Choteo skirts this line, and many times crosses it, but the most successful responses to choteo, and here I mean successful in terms of evoking laughter, succeed in tackling themes of tragedy, hurt, and pain without crossing the line. Generally, when subversive choteo creates a violation that exceeds the benign, it is with figures of authority. In Cuba, this often leads to some form of government censorship. Why then

⁹ The authors discuss this concept on pages 4-5 and 10 by offering the example of a particular joke about a church raffle in which churchgoers found the story a lot less humorous than non-churchgoers.

take the risk? Is the thought of suffering further not enough to prevent the use of choteo?

McGraw notes that this does not seem to be the case: “But here’s what’s puzzling about suffering and humor: people in desperate situations seem *compelled* to be humorous, even when it might get them in trouble” (154). While McGraw refers to U.S. captives in North Korea during the 1960s, I would argue that this concept can be applied to the use of choteo in Cuba throughout the twentieth century. Whether the sentiment belongs to the playwright or to the characters in the play, humor conceals feelings of desperation. It disguises the sorrow or frustration of not being able to change one’s situation and can also be used when the choteador feels trapped. As McGraw points out, “It’s almost as if making people laugh during dark and troubling times is so vital, so crucial, that it overrides common sense, and maybe even self-preservation” (155). In an attempt to preserve oneself, the use of humor may negate self-preservation by shifting the focus away from the serious situation. But, at the same time, in desperate situations, there often appears to be no other option.

But can choteo initiate change? Is it anything more than a simple coping mechanism? “After all,” McGraw argues, “some humor experts claim subversive humor doesn’t have any practical use whatsoever” (167). Does choteo serve a practical use? Does it do more than comfort people in desperate situations? Can it engender revolution? To further his question about the practical uses of subversive humor, McGraw imagines the perspective of the skeptics:

Show me an insurrection launched by joking, these skeptics say. Show me a despot overthrown, oppression overcome, because of the right punch line. Some people go further, arguing that not only is comedy incapable of launching revolutions, but it might have stopped a few from happening... it’s possible that joking among the discontented

masses might act as a safety valve, allowing folks to let off steam and view their plight in a less threatening manner instead of rising up in rebellion. (167)

Does choteo prevent potential uprisings? Even if ordinary choteo might not be effective in overthrowing the government or overcoming oppression, choteo in the theater is much more intentional in nature. Because intellectual choteo is preconceived, it is much more precise. While everyday choteo may allow Cubans to avoid the reality of their situation, intellectual choteo forces the audience to face this truth. This form of choteo is two-fold: one, it makes the audience laugh and relieves them of their realities for a short time; and two, it draws attention to these realities and encourages the audience to reflect on the situation presented and, maybe, inspire change.

Even though choteo may be a coping mechanism, it is not necessarily negative. McGraw proposes that “humor and coping, after all, seem to go hand in hand. Successful humor inspires all sorts of positive feelings and emotions, which can act as a psychological buffer when things go wrong” (189). Choteo has the potential to inspire positive feelings and emotions and generate positive changes. Even though the playwrights in this study do not necessarily provide a solution, they do draw attention to the problems at hand. This attention may encourage audiences to seek out a solution for themselves. At the very least, even if the humor in these plays fails to produce an answer, it creates a voice of resistance that stands out in opposition to the discourses of power.

Provided that the topics addressed can easily be understood by the audience, Hidalgo postulates that “el choteo funciona como una herramienta de humor crítico que la audiencia comparte y disfruta, en la medida en que los tópicos que el humorista trata son conocidos y

afectan a todos” (*Irreverencia y humor* 75). If the choteo is simply directed at an individual, it does not have the same critical effect as when it is presented to a larger audience. Hidalgo calls this concept “joda-con-rigor,” that is, a way of using choteo with intellectual or artistic rigor without losing the critical sense of humor found in choteo (77). This form of choteo goes beyond resignation and includes tones of resistance. It is this resistance that differentiates intellectual choteo from everyday choteo.

The playwrights in this study incorporate intellectual choteo in their plays to address different issues pertinent to Cuban society during times of unrest and change. Using the theater to criticize these familiar concerns with humor has the potential to encourage further discussion on the subjects presented. Choteo in the twentieth century speaks out against the dominant order. By integrating choteo into the text, the playwrights in this study find a way to speak out against authority figures. While this use of the humor is not completely original, in that it emerged from the tradition of black Cubans speaking out and choteando against the dominant classes of white Cubans, it is new in the sense that the official leadership is now the target of the choteo.¹⁰

History of the Humor in Cuban Theater

The incorporation of choteo in the theater dates back to the eighteenth century and was a cultural convention in Cuban society throughout the nineteenth century. The bufo tradition made theatrical choteo a popular custom but there is evidence that this humor was present in earlier Cuban theater. *El príncipe jardinero y fingido Cloridano*, by Santiago Pita, performed in Cuba for the first time in 1791, provided Cuban audiences with some of the earliest encounters with

¹⁰ While the word choteo, and thus choteando, is not typically used in conjunction with a preposition in Spanish, I have chosen to utilize an English preposition in most instances so as to clarify whether the choteo is against a specific target or mutually experienced with the target or third party. In a few instances, I have omitted a preposition for purposes of language flow.

choteo in the theater. According to Rine Leal, “Con esta comedia nace el choteo en nuestra escena, y la obra, lejos de ser una edulcorada visión artificiosa y literaria, se transforma en un juego, una burla, donde los personajes humildes, los ‘graciosos’ y criados, asumen de pronto la vitalidad y fuerza de lo popular y real” (*Breve historia* 17). Rosa Ileana Boudet confirms that “los rasgos de nuestra identidad caribeña aparecen muy temprano en los desenfadados burlones criados de *El príncipe jardinero o [sic] fingido Cloridano*” (“El escenario y la isla” 62-63). By allowing the “lower” characters to assume a certain degree of power over their superiors, Pita provided Cuba with its first example of theatrical choteo.

Choteo turns everything into a game or a joke, and this is what happens in *El príncipe jardinero* with its parody of church, courtly love, and social honor. There is an exaggeration of both the vices and virtues of the different characters in this play, and with that “...the play becomes a mirror of and for Cuban society” (Hill 61). Even in the eighteenth century, Cuba was a hybrid and transculturated society in which choteo was a part of everyday life, and, as such, it is not surprising that Pita incorporated it into his play.

A close reading of *El príncipe jardinero* allows the reader to see that Pita, consciously or not, recognized what made Cuba unique and wrote that into his text through the incorporation of choteo. While he may have drawn quite a bit of inspiration from the Spanish *comedia* and Spanish popular culture in the creation of his text, there was, at the same time, an effort to present elements of Cuba in what he wrote. Choteo served as one method for bringing Creole-Cuban culture to the heavily Spanish-influenced theater at the end of the eighteenth century. Pita may have been the first Cuban playwright to incorporate choteo into his text, but he was far from the most influential in that regard. Omar Valiño describes Cuban theater from the early

nineteenth century and the role that Francisco Covarrubias, the Cuban actor and dramatist known as the “Father of Cuban Theater” (Banham 159), played in that tradition:

Iniciada por Francisco Covarrubias a comienzos de siglo, legaba a esa altura no solo la voluntad ideotemática, sino la creación de una galería de tipos, el uso diferenciado de la lengua española, la música, el carácter paródico, el choteo, el ángulo para observar la realidad, la manera de enfrentar la comedia, características todas filtradas de una escena a otra: de lo popular a la elaboración culta y viceversa. (Valiño 85)

The first half of the nineteenth century saw the introduction of nationalistic themes in the theater as well as the rise of blackface theater. Romantic playwrights such as José María Heredia, José Jacinto Milanés, and Gertrudis Gómez de Avellaneda gained popularity during this time. Theater that spoke out against Spanish colonialism and advocated for a national identity also emerged. Julio A. Martínez suggests that “theatrical activity on the island closely paralleled that of Spain until the mid-nineteenth century” (458). Elements from these various theater traditions, as well as those of African descent, can be seen in the vernacular and bufo theater traditions that gained popularity in the second half of the nineteenth century. *Travieta, o la morena de las clavelinas*, by José Tamayo (1879), is just one example of a bufo play that integrated choteo into its nationalist discourse.

In *Blackface Cuba*, Jill Lane discusses the uses of choteo in nineteenth-century theater within the bufo theater tradition as well as in relation to blackface performances that were common in Cuba. In Lane’s descriptions of choteo during this time, its apparent disregard for others is evident, but its primary use seems only to perpetuate stereotypes of black Cubans and

foreigners (most frequently Galicians). Although there were a few attempts at overcoming differences and stereotypes in plays from this period, the majority of playwrights did not address these issues in a successful manner.¹¹ Choteo at this time did not necessarily speak out against societal issues, however, as Lane suggests, “[a]s a genre, the teatro bufo was generally anathema to formal political affiliation. Its cultivation of *choteo* as a sense of humor and an irreverent attitude toward imposed order did not lend itself to representing any party line” (120). And though choteo did not align with any specific political affiliation, it is in this period that a national sentiment in the theater and the emergence of a specifically *Cuban* theater arises, albeit more anti-Spanish than anything else. Lane contends that “the fanciful, and sometimes ironic, tone of these national self-representations adds, rather than detracts, from their power as sites for nationalist discourse: tongue-in-cheek irony itself, in the form of what Cubans were then just beginning to call choteo, was itself a celebrated feature of the newly emergent cubanía” (125). While Mañach’s formal study of the humor would not occur for another couple of decades, the concept of choteo was already well understood by the Cuban people and associated with national identity. As Lane further explicates, “With its compelling combination of music, humor, and social delineation, the teatro bufo of this period became the foundation for virtually all popular Cuban theatre, dance, and music from that time forward” (120). The bufo influence on the choteo that appears in the theater of the twentieth century, therefore, is quite evident. Even though the targets of the choteo may have changed from these earlier works, the approach taken with these performances greatly influenced how choteo would be used in later years.

¹¹ Bufo performances such as *La africana*, by Ignacio Saragacha (1882), and *Con don, sin don, ayer y hoy*, by Laureano del Monte (1894), clearly perpetuated the racial stereotypes present in Cuba at that time, while performances such as *Jacobo Girondi*, by Antonio Medina y Céspedes, and *La novia del general*, by Mariano Pina (both presented during the 1888 Velada Gómez-Fraternidad [Lane 128-30]), appeared to positively showcase black actors and musicians.

José Sánchez-Boudy also references the bufo tradition in his edited *Antología de chistes y otras expresiones humorísticas cubanas*. He states, “El llamado teatro bufo cubano nació en la colonia. Este teatro combinó el humorismo y el chiste en las llamadas piezas cómicas que se usaron como sátira política, aunque a veces no tenía intención crítica” (15). This statement calls to attention an important distinction between nineteenth- and twentieth-century choteo in the theater, and that is the critical intention behind the humor. While humorous plays with choteo and plays that mocked authorities existed during the nineteenth century, it is the combination of this mockery with a critical intention that differentiates choteo-laden plays of the twentieth century from those that came before.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the vernacular and bufo plays continued to be successful. The inclusion of elements of Cuban national identity aided in the triumph of the bufo over other forms of theater at the time. As Valiño asserts, “Readecuación de la práctica acumulativa de los bufos, el Teatro Alhambra resultó un símbolo de la encarnación del espíritu de las primeras tres décadas republicanas a través del choteo, cual carne de la neocolonia, tal como lo describió Jorge Mañach, parodia escapista y paralizante” (86).¹² However, this would not last forever, and even during these early decades of the twentieth century, the bufo tradition began to fade as the values that these plays reinforced began to change. Mañach’s analysis of the humor in *Indagación del choteo* reflects these changing values and perspectives in his association of choteo with a lack of discipline, disorder, and irresponsibility.

¹² Further information about Teatro Alhambra and the other Cuban theater houses at the turn of the century can be found in Rine Leal’s *Breve historia del teatro cubano*, Jill Lane’s *Blackface Cuba*, Yael Prizant’s *Cuba Inside Out*, and Rosa Ileana Boudet’s *Teatro cubano: relectura cómplice*, among others.

According to Rine Leal, the golden age of the bufo died along with Miguel Salas in 1896 (“Prólogo: La chancleta” 36).¹³ This does not mean that the bufo itself was eliminated entirely, nor that choteo in the theater disappeared, but rather that there were changes in the approaches to the theater in Cuba at this time.

Transformations and Applications in the Twentieth Century

With changes in social, political, and economic conditions in Cuba came changes in the applications of choteo. It has maintained its essence as an irreverent humor and has become more forceful in its anti-authoritarian stances. As Hidalgo explains, “Es preciso entender que el choteo evoluciona dentro de la sociedad cubana: no desaparece, sino que se reelabora conservando su esencia y adecuando su discurso al ámbito en que se produce” (72). The resignation in the humor is still apparent and, in certain cases, remains the focal point of many of the plays examined in this dissertation. But the most important change in the choteo from its earlier uses is the degree to which the critical element exists within the humor. Hidalgo insists, “Sin lugar a dudas, el choteo funciona como una herramienta de humor crítico que la audiencia comparte y disfruta, en la medida en que los tópicos que el humorista trata son conocidos y afectan a todos” (75). It is this familiarity with the subject matter that allows choteo to be both humorous and critical, no matter the time period. Although choteo has always maintained somewhat of an anti-authoritarian stance, it has had to adapt to the times. If choteo continued to target the same issues it would lose its relevance and effectiveness. In this study, I focus on different, yet specific, issues from each of the three time-periods I have chosen. The social, political, and economic

¹³ Miguel Salas was a famous bufo actor and playwright who was prolific during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. He was renowned for his use of the trio of *El negro*, *El gallego*, and *La mulata*, a common grouping of character types in early Cuban theater.

conditions of these three decades vary greatly from one another, but choteo is still prevalent in each one because there was a need to cope with specific changing situations and choteo was an effective tool for confronting (or, conversely, attempting to ignore) these circumstances. While Pérez Firmat suggests that “*choteo* does not seem to be a topic that deserves concentrated scrutiny” (*Literature and Liminality* 53), I disagree. It is in the choteo found in these plays where audiences can specifically identify the issues of the day and seek to make changes to the situation at hand.

Twentieth-century choteo in the theater is an expression of national sentiment and Cuban identity, but it can also be considered a way to escape the absurdities of daily life in Cuba and to disregard authority through humor. According to Raquel Agilú de Murphy, the use of humor, and especially that of choteo, served as “una manera de evadir la situación... en Cuba.” (99). Matías Montes Huidobro states that the concept of authority is violated by a humoristic temperament that places egalitarian character ahead of all else (“La reacción antijerárquica” 5). Choteo includes the idea that Cubans rebel against all authority – not just political authority, but also philosophical and artistic authority. In the theater, choteo often projects these sentiments through the characters on stage. Its use need not be attributed to the playwright or actor, but to the character. The theater therefore serves as a mask behind which the choteador may hide anti-authoritarian sentiments. And though the onstage choteador may be escaping the absurdities of daily life and avoiding particular situations, the playwright-choteador is in fact calling attention to the issues at hand. In certain instances, however, the choteo is not apparent to the characters on stage. In these moments, the playwright seems to be choteando directly with the audience.

Similar to dramatic irony, the idea is that the audience understands the humor even when the characters do not.¹⁴

Many sources that I consulted briefly mention choteo, but few delve into the implications of its use. One text that attempts to change how choteo is understood, at least from an academic standpoint, is Hidalgo's *Choteo: Irreverencia y humor*, in which the author discusses the inclusion of choteo in literature and the arts. Hidalgo explains that choteo can be seen as a form of humor used to fight the sadness of one's situation. It demonstrates contradictions of human existence with irreverence, criticism, and humor. Choteo, though occasionally used lightly, is frequently implemented as a consequence of social, political, and cultural factors (44). Again, Hidalgo refers to this particular form of choteo as "joda-con-rigor" and reveals that this choteo "es también un recurso teórico que permite a la voz discursiva establecer comparaciones y semejanzas con diferentes niveles de lectura, que tienden a desacralizar los referentes y sus significaciones más generales" (139). This perspective on the humor allows for a positive critical use of the humor and is in line with what I refer to throughout this study as intellectual choteo. Hidalgo further states, "El humor y el choteo han permitido expresar su inconformidad a aquellos quienes no han estado dispuestos a subordinar su inteligencia al orden dominante. Incluso se ha convertido en una herramienta estética que ha trasgredido el ámbito de la literatura, la pintura, las artes gráficas y la música" (214). In addition to these forms of expression, I contend that such intellectual choteo has permeated the field of theater as well. To make this claim and defend the positive effects of choteo in the arts and literature is a perspective that is

¹⁴ The difference in this cultural choteo between the playwright and the audience lies in the resignation that exists within choteo. It is not enough that the audience understands something that the characters do not (dramatic irony), but that they also understand the implications behind that situation.

relatively new, yet it is one that I think relevant and worth considering further through specific examples, in this case, from the theater.

Some scholars and critics, such as Rine Leal and Camilla Stevens, write about the use of choteo in Cuban theater, but these references are primarily mentioned in passing with little detail provided as to why choteo was used.¹⁵ I insist that if choteo was included in these works, it served a particular purpose based on the period in which the play was written. Choteo in these plays is not a throw-away form of humor, but rather a means of speaking out against the perceived resignation of society. At the *XIII Congreso Anual del Centro Cultural Cubano de Nueva York* held at the Helen Mills Theater in New York on October 5, 2014, Rafael Rojas discussed the transformations of choteo and even Mañach's evolving opinions on the subject. He described how choteo manifests itself in civil and political fields, serving not only as a way to mock authority, but also as a way of surviving daily life and experiences during difficult times. In addition to these two rationalizations for choteo, I see its application in the theater as a critical tool that speaks to the need for change, even when a specific solution is not inherently present.

By the twentieth century, choteo as a theatrical convention was something to which Cuban audiences would have been accustomed. However, the context of this choteo changed over time; while choteo as a theatrical convention had previously been expressed in racial and discriminatory contexts (e.g., through caricatures and ridicule of black Cubans, women, and foreigners), this new, intellectual choteo would use subversive and anti-hierarchical tactics to mock social, political, and economic concerns. The incorporation of this humor into the texts and productions took into account audience comprehension of the issues and their understanding of

¹⁵ See *Breve historia del teatro cubano* by Leal and *Family and Identity in Contemporary Cuban and Puerto Rican Drama* by Stevens. Leal mentions choteo in reference to its birth on the stage (17), as used by Covarrubias (34-35), and within the bufo tradition (75). Stevens on the other hand discusses the inclusion of choteo in specific plays such as *Lila, la mariposa* (82), *Aire frío* (91), *La noche de los asesinos* (113-114), and *Manteca* (211).

choteo. Because the target of the choteo could change within one play, writers had to assume that their audiences could distinguish between the direct target of choteo (i.e., a character within the play) and the indirect target of choteo (i.e., the audience itself or authority figures). Considering the problems addressed in these plays, it would be surprising if people were not familiar with the issues being presented.

Intellectual forms of choteo seen in the theater at different moments of unrest throughout the twentieth century can serve many purposes. Beyond denoting a certain relaxation and resignation toward a situation, choteo can be used to demonstrate discontent and frustration with authority figures. Subversive and anti-hierarchical choteo criticizes and belittles the requirements and constraints of the system and opposes the discourse of power. It reveals tensions that exist between social, political, and economic sectors in Cuba and serves as a response to these gaps as well as to nepotism and corruption. While choteo has historically ridiculed and discredited the “other” and expressed a lack of respect by reducing or humiliating its target, that target has changed throughout history. In particular, the victim of twentieth-century choteo is often the government or authority figures. This shift has aided in improving the perspectives held about the Cuban humor and has led to a slight increase in the number of scholars who recognize the humor as playing an important role in Cuban literature and culture. Although Mañach associated choteo with a lack of discipline, disorder, and irresponsibility, I contend that the humor serves as a way of opposing these characteristics in society. It creates an alternative Cuban national consciousness which, if taken further, could lead to improving the situation that is addressed through the humor.

In some of the plays in this study, the characters engage in choteo between and among themselves, while in others it is through the interpretation of the public that the playwright’s

choteo becomes visible. And even though oftentimes the victim of choteo is a character within the play or the audience itself, in other instances, it is the Cuban government that is the victim of the choteador. I analyze three levels of choteo with my study of these particular plays: choteo between characters, choteo directed at the audience (reader and/or viewer), and choteo against authority figures.

In her 2010 book *Libertad en cadenas: sacrificio, aporías y perdón en las letras cubanas*, Aída Beupied claims:

No es extraño que un país como Cuba donde tan hondo ha calado el trascendentalismo romántico sea también la tierra de la trompetilla burlona del choteador. Y aunque un letrado como Jorge Mañach no pudiese concederle su espacio dentro de lo que para él era la “alta cultura”, era inevitable que el choteo llegase a ocupar su justo lugar en las esferas más distinguidas de la cultura cubana. (11)

Here Beupied demonstrates that the changes in choteo over the twentieth century have been useful, if not beneficial, for Cuban culture. Although Mañach was unable to identify the positive implications of choteo during his lifetime, it is something that has since found its rightful place within Cuban culture.¹⁶ That place allows choteo a role beyond a simple and vulgar form of humor as Mañach suggested to that of an intellectual and critical tool. Hidalgo further expresses his belief that choteo is a complex concept when he states that it is “humor que no necesariamente implica una visión superficial de la realidad, sino una actitud que, en muchos

¹⁶ This can be further exemplified by the 2014 Cuban cultural conference I attended in New York City that focused exclusively on choteo. This all-day conference was well attended and offered a myriad of speakers including comedian Eddy Calderón, writers Gustavo Pérez-Firmat, Rafael Rojas, and Enrique del Risco, and actresses Carmen Peláez, Olga Merediz, and Xonia Benguría, among others.

casos deviene respuesta a las contradicciones de la existencia humana” (39). The contradictions apparent in Cuban society throughout the twentieth century are based on the social, political, and economic concerns of each moment. The plays I have chosen to analyze in this study all use choteo to address one or more of these matters.

Approaching this Study

As I stated at the beginning of this introduction, this is not an exhaustive study on the subject of choteo in the Cuban theater. There are many other plays written during the twentieth century that could be considered for different reasons, but my focus is on its use as an acknowledgement of the need for change. The nine plays analyzed in this study address social, political, and/or economic Cuban situations of their time and make what I consider to be a call for change. While it can be argued as to their degree of success in creating actual change, it is apparent to me that all of these playwrights use choteo to critique the Cuban situation in one way or another.

Chapter one examines the years following Machado’s dictatorship. Here I investigate the uses of choteo directed at social classes and social changes. These social developments were tied to both political and economic shifts during the time as well. The three plays I focus on during this period include *Y quiso más la vida* (1934), by José Cid Pérez, *Junto al río* (later published under the title *La luna en el río*) (1938), by Luis Baralt, and *El velorio de Pura* (1941), by Flora Díaz Parrado. Each of these plays uses choteo to tackle different societal issues of the time related to race, gender, and social class.

Cid Pérez’s play focuses on social class and the entitled privilege of the main character. *Y quiso más la vida* takes a critical stance against nepotism and the wealthy individuals within the

medical field. Even though the doctor himself, and even most of the other characters, would not be considered humorous, this play is a clear example of cultural choteo: the target of the humor is the medical field, but the joke is between Cid Pérez and the audience.

Of the playwrights chosen for this time-period, Baralt is probably the best known. His play, *Junto al río*, uses choteo to criticize a variety of social issues. Its humor challenges the accepted norms of the treatment of women, questions racial inconsistencies within Cuban society, and denounces purported revolutionaries who fail to follow through with promises to effect change. The choteo in this play exists between characters and is also directed at the audience and against authority figures.

Although Díaz Parrado's play was written when she lived in France and was not staged in Cuba for many years, the choteo in *El velorio de Pura* seems clearly intended for a Cuban audience. The velorio setting, while recognizable to outsiders, is specifically Cuban in its presentation. The humor among the women in this play show both a criticism of cultural norms and a resignation towards their situations. There are very few recognized women playwrights from the 1930s, so including Díaz Parrado not only provides another example of choteo, it also supplies a different perspective as to how choteo might be used to speak out against social expectations and in favor of cultural change.

In each of these cases choteo is used in response to the resistance to make or allow social changes. The plays from the 1930s also demonstrate some of the first uses of choteo to challenge stereotypes rather than perpetuate them, as had previously been seen.

Moving into the early years of Castro's Revolution, chapter two analyzes the use of choteo to discuss political unrest at this time. Of particular interest was the use of choteo to express a lack of change and a fear of repetition of previous political situations in the country.

The three plays I have chosen from this period include *El flaco y el gordo* (1959), by Virgilio Piñera, *La paz en el sombrero* (1961), by Gloria Parrado, and *La muerte del Ñeque* (1963), by José Triana.

Piñera is among the most renowned playwrights in Cuban history. I chose *El flaco y el gordo* because it is one of his less frequently analyzed plays and because the choteo in the text speaks to the changing political situation of that time. The play takes a somewhat absurdist approach to relaying its message, but the unmistakable choteo between the characters presents a critique of authority figures both old and new. Piñera uses this humor both to demonstrate and to question the seemingly cyclical history of the Cuban government.

Parrado may not seem like the obvious choice for a writer who uses choteo to question political authority since she is known more for writing “within” the Revolution than either of the other authors in chapter two. Although *La paz en el sombrero* does not overtly criticize Castro’s government, and focuses instead on the capitalist countries of the world, the choteo in the play is quite political. While choteo occasionally occurs between the characters, even within the text, that humor is largely directed against the leadership. More often than not, however, the choteo exists between the playwright and the audience as they mock the authority figures on the stage.

Triana is also among the most prominent Cuban playwrights, though *La muerte del Ñeque* is not one of his most famous plays. Completed two years before the acclaimed *La noche de los asesinos*, *La muerte* uses choteo to take a critical look at political and social corruption in Cuba. Choteo in this play happens among the different characters, but when it is directed against Hilario, it also seems to be directed against Cuban authority figures in general. The actions of this individual led to questioning about the play and who exactly was the target of the choteo.

Many plays from the early revolutionary period speak to the idea of feeling trapped in a cycle and an uncertainty about the political future, especially as to whether or not the new government would actually bring about positive changes. Although two of the plays I have chosen were written by canonical Cuban playwrights from this period, I have taken care to analyze some of their lesser studied plays so as to provide a different perspective on their works than has been previously studied. As I seek to demonstrate in this project, this particular use of choteo can be, and often has been, interpreted as a direct challenge to political forces.

Chapter three considers choteo in the theater during the Special Period. Throughout the early 1990s, there was much financial instability and many plays reflect the economic experiences of Cuban society at that moment. The changes in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union and loss of its support became a focus for many writers. In this chapter I look at a reemergence of choteo after a decline in its use in the 1960s and a decrease in censorship of plays that utilized choteo.¹⁷ Due to their specific socio-economic foci, I have chosen to analyze *Manteca* (1993), by Alberto Pedro Torriente, *Laberinto de lobos* (1994), by Miguel Terry, and *Vereda tropical* (1994), by Joaquín Miguel Cuartas Rodríguez.

Manteca is the only play I chose from the 1990s that was widely staged, and even it faced censorship and production issues. Torriente uses choteo in this play as a means of examining the resignation of the Cuban population after the economic changes in the early years of that decade. Although there is seemingly little humor between the characters, the choteo in this play exists on

¹⁷ This decline in choteo can be seen after Fidel Castro's famous speech, *Palabras a los intelectuales*, which took place on June 30, 1961, and its now-infamous phrase of "dentro de la revolución todo; contra la revolución, nada." This decrease in choteo in literary and other arts has been recognized by other Cuban literary scholars including Narciso Hidalgo and Julio A. Martínez.

a more cultural level. The characters on stage represent the different forms of resignation that existed and therefore the target of the humor is most frequently the audience itself.

Laberinto de lobos also uses choteo to critique the economic situation in Cuba at the time. While Terry, like Torriente, addresses the resignation apparent in the population, he also considers the ways in which Cuban citizens sought to do more than simply survive the hardships they experienced. At times the choteo in this play is cultural, with the audience serving as the object of the humor, but the choteo is also experienced by the characters as they target one another's purported superiority.

Using four generations of women and choteo, Cuartas Rodríguez addresses the differing perspectives on the socio-economic situation in Cuba. The choteo in *Vereda tropical* challenges each of the mindsets held by the characters, but especially that of the dedicated revolutionaries who are unable to accept that the world around them is changing and that, in order to survive, they must adapt with it. The choteo in this play exists among the characters, but targets audience members and authority figures as well.

Choteo in each of these plays seems to speak to the Cuban population's resignation in the face of these economic conditions, but I maintain it also draws attention to the situation in a way that challenges audiences to question their toleration of this way of life.

It was my original intention to discuss at least one female playwright in each chapter of this study. Not only did I consider it important for a diverse representation of authors, but I was curious to discover if there was something about choteo written by women that differed from that of their male counterparts. While *El velorio de Pura* and *La paz en el sombrero* seem to show different approaches to choteo than the other plays I have chosen from those time periods, it appears to have less to do with the gender of the authors and more to do with the topics that they

chose to address. I do not believe that Díaz Parrado or Parrado's subject choices were based on their gender, but rather on the social and political situations they were living with at the time in which they wrote. In fact, the playwright that I most considered for this study, Carmen Duarte, suggests that Cuban theater is not extreme in its feminism and she claims that "la nuestra es una dramaturgia más preocupada por lo social en general, por lo ético, más que por problemas específicos de la mujer" (Estorino 79).

When choosing a playwright from the Special Period, it was at first difficult to find women playwrights who remained on the island and were actively writing at that time. For those that did write, there seems to be very little humor in their works, and even less choteo. I considered Carmen Duarte as a playwright who integrated a certain degree of choteo into her works written prior to leaving Cuba in 1993,¹⁸ but upon further analysis, what little choteo there was did not fit with the economic focus of the other works discussed in chapter three. While her work was certainly critical of the Cuban situation at that time, it was difficult to pinpoint moments of choteo, at least in how they were critical of the economic situation in Cuba.¹⁹

¹⁸ In Antonio J. Molina's book, *Mujeres en la historia de Cuba*, it says the following about Duarte: "**Carmen Duarte.** Dramaturga que vive en el exilio, junto a otros: Matías Montes Huidobro, Luis Alejandro Baralt, Fco. Morín, Herberto Dumé, Andrés Castro, Rine Leal, Jorge Folgueira, *Leanne Labrada*, Jorge Trigoura, Raúl de Cárdenas, Iván Acosta, Pedro Monge, Manuel Martín, *Yara González Montes*, Marcelo Salinas, José Cid Pérez, Ramón Ferrerira, Eduardo Manet, Fermin Borges, *Julia Matas*, René Ariza, José Triana, Manuel Reguera Saumell, Pedro Monge Rafuls, José Corrales, Héctor Santiago, Mario Martín, Mario Peña, Evelio Tallacq, Miguel Glez. Pardo, José Abreu Felipe, Orlando Rossardi, Fdo. Villaverde, Jorge Valls, José E. Puente, *Yolanda Ortal*, Manuel Martín, René Alomá, Renaldo Ferrada, *July de Grande*, *Dolores Prida*, Nilo Cruz, Luis Santeiro, Lorenzo Mans, Elías Miguel Muñoz, Manuel Pereira y Leopoldo Hernández" (253). I purposely included all the names that Molina mentioned as authors in exile to focus on the fact that he could say nothing about the author herself except that she was a playwright who lived in exile. The emphasis on the names of the women is mine and serves to draw attention to the fact that of the forty-seven names that he included alongside hers, in a book about Cuban women, Molina includes only six names of women. This shows how little time was put into researching who she is and what she did.

¹⁹ Two works that were potential contenders for their use of choteo were *El golpe y la risa* (1991) and *Cruzada en puertagrande* (1993). Neither of these plays, along with many others written by Duarte, were ever formally published, but they can be found on her official website carmen-duarte.com. Performance information and political history around each of these plays exist in brief introductory paragraphs to each of the works uploaded there. *El golpe y la risa* was never staged due to claims that it "reflejaba la realidad cubana de una forma retorcida, amarga, fea y pesimista y que esto no era permisible." *Cruzada en puertagrande* was performed at the Bertolt Brecht theater but was closed after only six performances on allegations that "las autoridades del Consejo de Artes Escénicas tenían una opinion desfavorable del espectáculo." (Accessed 26 January 2017)

I am not the only one to recognize the lack of women writers during this time period. As Catherine Davies points out, “[T]he overall presence of women’s writing on the post-revolutionary cultural map is disappointing, both with regard to the quantity and quality of works published” (122). Davies looks at women writers overall, and not just those in the theater. She suggests that any potential boom in women’s writing in Cuba “was tragically cut short by the economic collapse of the early 1990s. A virtual standstill in publishing brought on by a lack of paper meant that many women writers did not publish at all during the early 1990s” (126). What this indicates to me is not that there was a shortage of women writers, but just simply that, with the lack of resources to write down their stories or to get them published, many women writers were left with no way of sharing their stories with the world, or at least with their fellow Cubans. This issue speaks to the precarity of the economic situation in the country at that time.

In each of these time-periods I see playwrights as writing not only to entertain audiences with the use of choteo, but also to confront them with the situations to which they (as audiences) have resolved themselves to living, even as they attempt to jostle these audiences out of a passive acceptance of current cultural conditions. As Susan Bennett readily admits in *Theatre Audiences: a Theory of Production and Reception*, “[T]he involvement of the audience in the theatrical event is undoubtedly complex” (177). Traditionally, the audience expects to take on a passive role as spectator to a performance, but, in many cases, the playwright attempts to undermine this passivity and persuade audiences to at least think, if not act, differently. By bringing attention to larger-scale cultural issues via the theater, these playwrights reflect the current conditions in Cuba, while perhaps simultaneously attempting to engender a rejection of the acceptance of said situation and invoke change. Choteo is an element of Cuban identity that is constantly evolving

and, in each of these plays, is shown to be more complex than simply laughing at oneself or another, and not taking one's situation seriously; it also serves as a call for change.

Chapter 1: Reformation and transformation? Social Choteo after Machado's Republic

Era una noche cualquiera de los años 30. Cuba vivía los estertores de los últimos meses de la dictadura del Presidente Machado. Había una terrible persecución de los enemigos del régimen. El ambiente no era para bromas. (Cosío 165)

This chapter considers the years immediately following Gerardo Machado's regime (1925-1933) with plays written between 1934 and 1941. Based on the context of the three plays discussed in this chapter (*Y quiso más la vida*, by José Cid Pérez; *Junto al río*, by Luis Alejandro Baralt; and *El velorio de Pura*, by Flora Díaz Parrado), social class, race, and gender appear to be important contemporary issues. The use of choteo by these three playwrights to address social matters directly reflects a blending of topicality and humor as described by Freud while exemplifying some of the first uses of choteo in the theater to challenge stereotypes rather than perpetuate them, as had been seen previously during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.²⁰

In order to discern the intentions of choteo at this time, one must understand both the individual and the collective topicalities prevalent in Cuba at the end of Machado's regime. It is also necessary to consider the discourse of the choteador and the space or environment in which choteo is being used. Beginning in the first third of the twentieth century, this Cuban humor transitions into one that is frequently used *against* oppression and dehumanization rather than one that oppresses and dehumanizes.

²⁰ Freud wrote that "the factor of topicality is a source of pleasure, ephemeral it is true but particularly abundant, which supplements the sources inherent in the joke itself" (*Jokes* 151). Topicality is inherent in theatrical choteo during the 1930s (and beyond), and each playwright's subject choice speaks to this topicality. The joke, or the choteo, used to make the situation humorous, expresses what the important social issues of the day were.

In each of these plays we see choteo used to respond to a resistance to make or allow social changes. I begin this chapter by looking at the desire for social advancement in Cuba and the shifts in attitudes that came with the removal of Machado. I show how these changes link to a rise in theatrical choteo during this time and how they align with perspectives on Cuban society of the day. Using *Y quiso más la vida*, I consider how choteo is applied to critique social class and the egos of those in the medical field in an attempt to subvert the classist attitudes held by many in this profession at the time. With *Junto al río*, I analyze the role of race and gender as they relate to attempts at political change and also how choteo is used in these circumstances to demonstrate the status quo that often permeates the political world. And finally, in *El velorio de Pura*, I focus on women and tradition and how choteo can be used to question certain Cuban customs of the time period. The conclusion considers reactions to this particular form of choteo as well as reflections on its effectiveness at that time.

At this point in Cuba's history, choteo was a comedic style that had been under criticism and, as such, our playwrights did not necessarily openly acknowledge their incorporation of choteo, but it was present in each of these plays in a way that was unavoidable because of the culture in which they lived. As these are some of the earliest attempts at using choteo in this particular, subversive manner, it is not surprising that playwrights were subtle in its implementation.

In this chapter I will show how some playwrights use choteo to express a desire to reduce inequalities of race, gender, and social class in 1930s and 40s Cuba. This was one of the first times where theater in Cuba truly began to liberate itself from the influences of Spanish realism and French melodramas (González Freire, *Teatro cubano contemporáneo (1928-1957)* 24). And while it still maintained certain elements of these other theatrical forms, Cuban theater now

focused primarily on Cuban issues and was intended mainly for a Cuban audience.²¹ Henri Bergson's assertion that "comedy depicts characters we have already come across and shall meet with again" (163) allows the spectator or reader to identify the similarities between the types of characters presented and the types of characters that are easily identifiable, either through the theater or in real life. Without a doubt these "types" are evident in the plays I examine from this period. In each play the characters are based on cultural types that the playwrights recognized from their own time and place: the egotistical doctor, the complacent wife, the wasted revolutionary, the resigned hermit, the mourning sisters, and the gossipy neighbors, for instance. Many of the characters are assigned individual names, but, overall, those names are of less importance than the types that they represent. The humor lies in the audience recognition of each of these types. When types are created with specifically Cuban traits, it allows for the use of a choteo that will be both understood and appreciated by audiences.

Natividad González Freire divides playwrights of the Republic into three different generations. The playwrights analyzed in this chapter all belong to what she refers to as the Second Generation.²² She indicates that within this generation there was something of a mini-revolution that in many ways countered the actions of Machado. The three plays analyzed in this chapter were published shortly after Machado's removal from power, and there seems to be a clear shift in the degree of criticism of the former regime during this time. Earlier playwrights had been censored within the Machado regime, but those in the years immediately following seemed able to express their concerns and criticisms of the social structures and norms in place during Machado's earlier government.

²¹ Rine Leal briefly touches on these early attempts in *Breve historia del teatro cubano*, specifically in chapter four, "La neocolonia municipal y espesa" (101-128).

²² For more information on this generation as well as the preceding and following generations, see *Teatro cubano contemporáneo (1928-1957)*. La Habana: Sociedad Colombista Panamericana, 1958.

In 1933, the same year Machado was ousted from power, US author, journalist, and historian Carleton Beals wrote that “only recently has the bitter anti-Machado struggle altered and deepened the attitude of the younger generation” (85). This change in attitude among younger Cubans could be reflective of the shift in how, and to what extent, choteo was used. Only five years earlier, Jorge Mañach had presented his speech on the effects of choteo on Cuban culture and had stated that he believed it would be one of the deciding factors in Cuban society’s future success or failure. When Mañach originally spoke on the subject, he was opposed to the rise of choteo in Cuba and concerned that it would negatively impact Cuba’s future. In the years that followed there was a continual rise in the usage of choteo in Cuba, but it was a more progressive form of choteo.²³ The removal of Machado seems to be the spark meant to initiate change in the country, but it also appears to have provoked an increase in the use of choteo in the country, especially in more formal, literary works – including the theater. José Corrales adds that, similar to many Latin American countries at this time, “in the 30’s the [Cuban] theatre was much concerned with social issues and, what is best, it was concerned with the recognition, establishment [*sic*], sources and future of the theatre itself” (2). The desire to focus on social issues such as class, race, and gender made this period an interesting time for growth in the theater in Cuba and a perfect opportunity to incorporate more of the Cuban choteo that spoke out against the ruling powers. Only by speaking out could changes be expected to take place, and theater served as a logical and accessible vehicle for these voices.

²³ Considering the various revisions that Mañach made to his “Indagación del choteo” speech/publication, it is safe to acknowledge that his perspectives on the humor changed over time. This is discussed in detail in the introduction of this study. For further reading, Erica Miller explains some of these changes in her article, “De choteos y choteadores en *Indagación del choteo*, de Jorge Mañach.” Gustavo Pérez Firmat also addresses this change in his book *Literature and Liminality* as does Rosario Rexach in *La estructura de los ensayos de Jorge Mañach*.

The rise in theatrical choteo in the 1930s by no means marked the first time that this humor had been used in Cuban theater to contradict the authorities. As far back as the eighteenth century, choteo had been identified in the theater as an anti-authoritarian device.²⁴ However, the post-Machado era was one of the first times that choteo in the theater had not focused on racial, social, or gender-based humor that *oppressed*. This seemingly socially aware form of choteo spoke out *against* oppression. Perhaps this is where Mañach began to see that choteo would not lead to the downfall of Cuban society. In fact, as Narciso Hidalgo explains, in his 2012 book on choteo in Cuban culture, “Si el choteo al que se refería Mañach, en el primer cuarto de vida republicana, estaba asociado a una actitud antijerárquica... sin duda respondía a las desigualdades, al peculado, a la corrupción política y administrativa y a la falta de organización de las instituciones” (*Irreverencia y humor* 68). When Mañach recognized this corruption from within the Machado regime, he began to acknowledge some of the importance of choteo in Cuban culture (Miller 384; Rexach np). Later in his life, even if he did not openly support the use of choteo, Mañach no longer saw it as being an immediate threat to Cuban society.

In Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren’s 2010 study, they suggest that “humor is a positive and adaptive response to benign violations. Humor provides a healthy and socially beneficial way to react to hypothetical threats, remote concerns, minor setbacks, social faux pas, cultural misunderstandings, and other benign violations people encounter on a regular basis” (1148). The Cuban playwrights of the 1930s and 1940s, therefore, would attempt to create these benign violations with choteo. In each case the humor would be designed to fit the particular social circumstances of the day. The spectators (or readers) would find humor in these situations depending on their psychological distance from the choteo. Their understanding of the choteo

²⁴ See Introduction, for discussion on *El príncipe jardinero y fingido Cloridano*.

being used would allow them to feel that they had an insider's perspective of the joke and that they were not the target of the humor (even if sometimes that would be the case). The audience would, however, understand who the targets were and, perhaps upon reflection, would even recognize their own roles in each particular story.

Choteo in the theater continued to emerge throughout the years of the Republic. Even early uses of choteo in twentieth-century theater productions were seen to have been used to parody public figures, politicians, public events, operas, and literature, but above all, to critique contemporary situations in Cuba.²⁵ While this irreverence to socially accepted conditions was something that people employed in private conversation, the idea of including mockery of authority figures in the theater was one that in many instances led to censorship or at least a reduction in the total number of performances. Plays from the late 1930s in particular, and even those from the 1940s and 1950s, demonstrated an important reflection of how different aspects of society were perceived at that time, how they connected to the Machado regime, and to the fall of his dictatorship.

Mañach gave his speech on choteo in 1928, and Beals wrote his book, *The Crime of Cuba*, in 1933. Both of these individuals spoke about the prevailing Cuban condition of the day in their works. Mañach wrote from within Machado's dictatorship and, in later editions of the written version of this original speech, demonstrated that, as time went on, his ideas about choteo and its uses evolved.²⁶ As a US citizen, journalist, and historian, Beals wrote from the perspective of an outsider. And even though his writing may seem grossly outdated, it was considered radical at the time (Britton 232). In one of the few detailed English-language

²⁵ See Boudet's book *Teatro cubano: relectura cómplice*, where she discusses the irreverent atmosphere of the Alhambra theater performances during the early years of the twentieth century (31).

²⁶ There are six editions of Mañach's speech turned essay, each with at least slight variations from the previous editions, but some with more substantial changes.

descriptions of the Cuban humor from this period, Beals dedicates a section of his chapter “The Cuban as He Is” to the concept of choteo. Of course, it is necessary to read between the lines to determine the truths in Beals’s biased description of choteo and its use. He first makes an observation that links choteo and the lack of concern for the “victim” of choteo by the choteador: “Just as he accepts himself as an independent functioning entity, so he expects the next man to feel the same, hence no need for exaggerated politeness” (Beals 83). Here it is important to note Beals’s expectation that the victim will feel the same as the choteador in regards to the choteo. The interpretation made by Beals that Cubans expect the “victim” not to be overly sensitive to the choteo is important. This humor does not strive to be malicious in any way, but rather serves as a method by which the choteador can bring some levity to a certain situation of unrest. This comment about others interpreting choteo the same way as the choteador connects directly to Beals’s argument later on the same page where he states that “were it not for the Cuban’s heartiness, honesty and sheer love of living, plus a decidedly invigorating skepticism, he would be stamped as shallow. For he simply refuses to take life seriously. The profound person is considered a bore; the consistent person, annoying” (83). While it seems as though Beals focuses on the levity in the attitudes of the Cuban people, he also recognizes that there is more to choteo than empty humor. As an outsider it may be more difficult for him to recognize this important distinction in the behavior of Cubans regarding humor. Although Cubans may not take life seriously, that does not mean they are uncritical or that they have no understanding of the world around them. Quite the opposite in fact: Beals mentions the skepticism that allows the reader to understand there is a logical reason behind the Cuban attitude toward the world around him. As Gastón Baquero explains, in his 1962 article on Mañach, “[él] vio en la burla el arma de defensa, la máscara que hay sobrepuesta a una realidad dolorosa; comprendió que en el fondo el cubano

es un ser serio, inclinado a la tristeza, a lo trágico o a lo romántico al menos, y señaló que el resorte de la burla, del choteo... representaba una denuncia del íntimo deseo de lucha” (22).

While it is evident that Beals has gathered much of his understanding of choteo from Mañach’s essay on the subject, it is noteworthy that both men understood the rationale behind the choice to use this humor, even if neither considered its use a potentially successful means to an end. Beals was able to comprehend choteo to a certain degree, but he seems to have been unaware of the effectiveness of choteo in revealing and responding to social and political tensions within the country.

In the same year as the fall of Machado, Beals writes that “three escapes for individualism exist: rebellion or rational conformity or the achievement of personal power. *Choteo* is disguised rebellion inadequate to rebel” (89). Beals understands what choteo is trying to achieve, but he does not believe that it can be successful. Through analysis of three plays from this time period, I contend that, even if choteo cannot be fully effective in eliciting change, there is an importance to its attempts to do more than just provoke laughter.

Choteo in Cuban theater of the 1930s and early 1940s was often used to promote a particular social cause or point of view. In order to do this, many Cuban playwrights would poke fun at their own current social situations, their government, and even themselves for the way in which they responded to social conditions within the country. Each of the plays that I examine in this chapter demonstrates and critiques different aspects of Cuban society through the use of choteo. Sometimes this choteo happens between characters, other times it exists between the author and the audience, but in all instances, I see the use of choteo in these plays as a call to change from the playwright to his or her audience.

Y quiso más la vida: Choteo, Social Class, and Ego

A socio-cultural choteo where the audience is more the victim of choteo than the characters in the play itself is quite apparent in the theater of the 1930s and early 1940s. Here the theater seems to take steps to criticize not so much the black Cuban or foreign characters, but more the white men in positions of power. One way in which playwrights address these socio-cultural issues is to make the central character the villain of the story. As Bergson claims, “Not infrequently comedy sets before us a character who lays a trap in which he is the first to be caught. The plot of the villain who is the victim of his own villainy, or the cheat cheated, forms the stock-in-trade of a good many plays” (94). This can be seen in the case of *Y quiso más la vida*, where the main character, Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza, is the victim of his own villainy. He is not an intentionally malicious villain, but his actions put the lives of many of the other characters in the play at risk. His actions have consequences, but luckily for the majority of the characters, the consequences are most severely felt by the doctor himself.

José Cid Pérez (1906-1994) was born in Cuba and later moved to Kansas in the United States after the triumph of the 1959 Revolution and he remained there until his death. He was known for being a playwright, a director, actor, teacher and critic both in Cuba and in the United States. As the youngest of three sons, he was allowed more flexibility in pursuing his dreams of becoming a writer. He became involved in the theater at a young age with support from his mother, Mercedes, and his foster-sister, María. The influence of these women as well as his wife, Dolores Martí, had a profound impact on how he wrote women in his plays and his belief that they were equal if not superior to men (Davis 13). His awareness of the world around him also influenced the themes he focused on in his writing.

At first glance, Cid Pérez's play *Y quiso más la vida* (1934) may seem like an unlikely choice for a play that deals with choteo. Originally titled *El doctor*, there is little to no choteo to be found between characters within the text.²⁷ In fact the dialogue and general storyline do not seem overly humorous at all and at times can come across as quite irritating and distressing. The choices made by Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza, are selfish and egotistical at best. At worst, they are life threatening. In each act, the doctor is asked to save the life of at least one individual: in the first act it is that of his wife (and/or son) as she gives birth; in the second act it is his son's life as he battles with a previously unknown plague; and in the third and final act, it is the life of a young child who is his patient. In all cases the lives of these individuals are only saved due to the intervention of other characters – doctors and family members.

While *Y quiso más la vida* was published in 1934,²⁸ the play was not staged for another seventeen years, until 1951, when it was debuted by the Compañía de Magda Haller y Otto Sirgo, at the Teatro Principal de la Comedia, on December 8th. The play was staged five times during this run. According to Roberto Herrera, “Hay que tener en cuenta, pues, que dicha obra fue estrenada muchos años después de haber sido escrita; y a pesar de este hecho, tuvo gran éxito de público y de crítica...” (182). The years surrounding this play are important in demonstrating the social and political situation in Cuba at that time. The fact that it was written, but not published, before the departure of Machado, and the fact that it was not staged for nearly two decades illustrates the potential censorship of the work by the Cuban authorities. And while there

²⁷ This alternate title is provided by Natividad González Freire in her book *Teatro cubano contemporáneo (1928-1957)*, published in 1958. She indicates that the play was also performed in Spain and Central America and that it was at one point translated into Italian as well (65).

²⁸ The dates for this play vary from source to source. Some accounts have parts of it being written as early as 1930. Other dates for this play range from 1931 to 1934. I have chosen the latest date because this was the year in which *Y quiso más la vida* was published and won the *Premio Nacional de Literatura* (Jackson and Guillermo, 29).

is no evidence that this play was in fact officially censored, it is apparent that there were issues with both the publication and production of the work.

Matías Montes Huidobro discusses *Y quiso más la vida* in chapter seven of his book *El teatro cubano durante la República: Cuba detrás del telón*. He titles his chapter “José Cid Pérez (1906): Hombre de dos mundos” and writes about how Cid Pérez lived both during and after the Machado dictatorship and how this experience influenced his writings. Montes Huidobro believes that Cid Pérez’s play was performed so far after the date when it was written that it is considered “una obra envejecida” and “pasada de moda” by the time it was staged in 1951 (*Detrás del telón* 200). And perhaps there is a certain degree of truth to this statement. However, I would suggest that since the issues dealt with in *Y quiso...* had not been “solved” by 1951, it remains significant. From a historical perspective there is much that, even today, is relevant about the play – in particular the issues of the role of women in society and nepotism. I agree with Mary Jackson and Edenia Guillermo in believing that the audiences of 1951 still found the play relevant: “El teatro de Cid no está ceñido a ningún tiempo o lugar. Las situaciones por él creadas podrían ocurrir dondequiera y en cualquier tiempo. Su intención es profundamente humana y tiene, por tanto, un interés universal” (30). However, Cid Pérez’s work was written at a very specific point in time in Cuban history, and it is a direct reflection of the time and place in which it was written, even if it may still be relevant. The final years of the Machado dictatorship, as well as the first years after the fall, mark a point in history in which there were many social issues that Cubans began to address more openly. *Y quiso más la vida* is directly critical of many of these issues, in particular those of social and class divisions prevalent in Cuba at the time. And though the majority of the reviews of the 1951 staging were positive, the better part of those that were critical of the production focused primarily on the underlying message of the play as one

critiquing the social situation in Cuba, while others were critical of the role of the doctor and the message that his actions brought to the play.²⁹ It was uncommon to critique the medical field in the way that Cid Pérez did in this piece, and as such it was not universally accepted without question. However, at the same time, as Michele S. Davis mentions in her book *A Dramatist and his Characters: José Cid Pérez*, “There are enthusiastic critics who see in this play a cry for change” (65).³⁰

This cry for change is how choteo incorporates itself into this text. Just because a piece is critical does not automatically mean that it employs choteo; however, choteo can be critical. Most notably, choteo uses mockery to criticize the system and to demonstrate discontent and frustration with those in power. Doctors are, without a doubt, individuals that wield immense power within a given society. They have the power to heal or not, and society largely depends on the decisions made by those in the medical field when it comes to their health. The fact that Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza relies primarily on his reputation appears, at first glance, as though it could perhaps be helpful to the members of the community. But, in this play, Cid Pérez mocks doctors whose egos get the best of them. Dr. Álvarez de Mendoza thinks he knows how to save the lives of the characters in his charge in each of the three acts, but it is clearly demonstrated to the audience that he has nothing to do with the healthy outcome and survival of these characters presented to us on the verge of death. If it were not for Doctor Ansola, his mentor and colleague, Dr. Álvarez de Mendoza would have most likely lost his wife, Angélica, *and* his son in the first

²⁹ These reviews are numerous and were found within the Dolores Martí de Cid Collection at the Cuban Heritage Collection in Miami Florida, Box 34, folder 439, Accessed June 2016.

³⁰ Narciso Hidalgo explains that “no cabe duda que la República de ‘generales y doctores’ (1902-1933) se caracterizó por una política de indulgencia en la que reinaban la corrupción política y administrativa, los escándalos por abusos de poder, el nepotismo, la violencia, la segregación racial, la ineptitud e impunidad de las instituciones...” (*Irreverencia* 59). This characterization of Republican Cuba has a direct correlation to the subject of Cid Pérez’s play and the subsequent choteo found within it.

act. He was willing to risk the life of the mother simply to have a son. He was more concerned with carrying on the legacy of his name than with the survival of his wife. This is a concern addressed by his mother, Elisa, as she questions him on his motives. For Cid Pérez to address this in a play would not only be quite critical of the medical field, but would also speak to nepotism as a cultural conflict.

The humor in *Y quiso más la vida* lies in the interpretation of the text by the audience. They might laugh thinking that the words and actions of Dr. Álvarez de Mendoza would not be true of real doctors or, at the very least, consider them a gross exaggeration, but they would also simultaneously acknowledge the reality of the situation. Elisa is concerned that the two doctors are spending more time discussing the situation and not enough time actually looking in on the patient and addressing her specific medical issues. Doctor Ansola, in fact, does acknowledge this egoism to Elisa, telling her, “Tiene razón, señora, tiene razón. Es que cuando se reúnen dos médicos, discuten más que curan” (Cid Pérez 97). Again, the doctor himself may or may not consider this choteo, and Elisa, who is the recipient of his words, certainly would not, but the audience might laugh, understanding the truth found in them, while they simultaneously acknowledge the problems behind this sort of interaction between two doctors.

Elisa is also quite critical of many aspects of her son’s decisions in this first act. She is the voice that critiques the role of women in 1930s Cuba. What moves this critique into the realm of choteo is not that Elisa thinks she is being funny, or that her son interprets her words in such a way as to find humor in them, but rather, again, that the audience would find humor in this interaction. When the doctor mentions what can be learned about women and their bodies from books, she questions this by asking, “¿Esos libros a que te refieres, están escritos por alguna mujer?” (94). This simple inquiry immediately calls into question the validity of these purported

“expert sources” on women. The doctor of course responds in the negative, but with a defense to justify their value: “No; pero sí por la experiencia de los casos clínicos.” This is not enough for Elisa, who replies “¡La experiencia! ¡Qué importa la experiencia! Ni aunque una mujer los hubiera escrito, podría un hombre comprenderlos. Para eso es necesario romperse las entrañas y dar vida a un ser” (94). Elisa insists that until he or any other so-called doctor has given birth, they will have no idea of what it is like to have a baby. With these lines, she criticizes the male-dominated medical field. According to Elisa, if women were allowed to become obstetricians, then perhaps there would be fewer issues. She tells the doctor that only a woman can understand what another woman is going through. Throughout this exchange, her son keeps referring to his trusted books and standing by his classroom knowledge. He relies on this to prove his expertise in a given area (and he does this again in the later acts as well) and to insist to his mother that even though he himself is not the expert on gynecology, his colleague and mentor, Doctor Ansola, is the only one who can save his son, and maybe his wife, if possible. In this scene Cid Pérez uses Elisa as the messenger for his choteo. What is particularly interesting about this little bit of choteo is that the playwright is a man. He also is unable to relate directly to the plight of a woman giving birth but makes sure to take the time to recognize the reality of this fact through Elisa’s declaration. The audience or reader would comprehend, at least to a certain extent, that this was true: a man can never fully understand what a woman goes through during childbirth. They would also be cognizant of the fact that they lived in this same sort of world, a world where the man is the doctor and that he is the alleged expert on the birthing procedure due simply to his medical background and not to his own experiences. And while it is certainly true that men can (and do) become qualified obstetricians, Cid Pérez is choteando against doctors and men in

general that believe they understand women solely based on reading about them.³¹ This scene is simultaneously serious and humorous. The realities of this world are all too real, but the thought of a man giving birth brings a certain levity to the discussion being held on stage, at least from the perspective of the audience and/or reader.

The entire first act also includes choteo directed at members of the medical field and their lack of faith in God – at least until it serves their purposes to believe. Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza continually and repeatedly insists on science, that is, until it comes to the crucial moment in which both his wife and his future child’s lives are at risk, and then suddenly he places blame on “la vida” or something beyond the control of science. He claims that the only thing that could make him believe in God would be if both his wife and his son were saved. Doctor Ansola is, in fact, able to save both the mother and the child, and at the end of Act I, Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza is seen praying for forgiveness (109). This repentant mindset does not appear to last for long though, and it is notably absent from the remainder of the play.

In the second act, the life now on the line is that of Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza’s son, Luisito. Moments before Luisito falls ill, the two doctors are seen conversing about the fiscal state of Cuba and, in particular, the effect that these economic changes are having on the lower classes and, as a result, on the medical field as well.

Dr. Ansola. El trabajo, hijo. Ahora que la situación está mala, hay reunión allá arriba para enviarnos chicos para acá, para hacer más imposible la vida aquí...

³¹ Michele S. Davis, in *A Dramatist and his Characters: José Cid Pérez*, discusses the “flexible, liberal and sympathetic” attitude of Cid Pérez toward women and his “claims to be one of the first suffragists in his native country of Cuba” (13). Source found in the Dolores Cid de Marti collection at the CHC, Miami Florida, Box 34, folder 451, Accessed June 2016.

Dr. Á. De Mendoza. ¿Y se queja? Cuando todos estamos peor, usted gana más, se enriquece.

Dr. Ansola. ¡Qué va hijo! ¿Ganar más? Todo lo contrario. Ahora el que nace, nace fiado.
(111-12)

There are two ways in which one might consider the presence of choteo in this interaction. First, there is the fact that the doctors are discussing the profit side of their field. They are contemplating the idea that the sicker the population is, the more money there is to be made. A conversation in which doctors commodify human lives can be construed as a very dark form of choteo. Second, choteo can demonstrate a disgust with authority figures, and this dialogue between the two doctors demonstrates what can be seen as Cid Pérez's disgust with many doctors in Cuba. On one level it seems almost too dark to laugh about, but again, the resignation found in choteo leads me to believe this could be interpreted as humorous.

This scene is a severe critique of the medical field and its motives for helping people. While not all doctors are like this, Cid Pérez seems to be making a point that this attitude is more prevalent than it should be. This seemingly humorless conversation reinforces the issues of power and the gaps between social classes in Cuba. Cid Pérez addresses serious issues that were plaguing Cuba in the 1930s. Given the characteristics of these two doctors, we are unlikely to read choteo in these lines of the text. What then makes it choteo? The audience's understanding of humor blended with the somber and critical reality of the situation marks these lines as choteo. The second element of choteo in this short interaction between the two doctors is that which deals with the acknowledgement and mockery of the economic situation in Cuba at this time. In this moment Cid Pérez critiques the economic position of so many individuals within Cuban society. He reinforces the understanding that these individuals are so impoverished that they can

never pay for their medical visits. The specific critique would be of the system that was created and developed in such a way as to make so many suffer, including the doctors. Here is the choteo then: that the doctors suffer as much as the poor people who are unable to pay their medical bills. That the doctors are suffering would be amusing to audiences of the time.³²

Self-preservation and concern reappear in the second act in the form of egotism. This egotism allows for the consideration of the choteo in this act as one that is presented on a cultural level rather than a textual one. As the act progresses, it becomes more and more difficult to take Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza seriously. During the above-mentioned conversation, the two doctors discuss the possibility of a new epidemic that has recently emerged and the proposals by a Doctor Mangler on how to treat this new disease. Here Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza labels rumors of this so-called epidemic as “tonterías” and describes them as “pretextos para reconocer ese célebre suero que ha inventado el doctor Mangler” (Cid Pérez 115). It is important to recall his earlier comments about the financial situation of doctors in Cuba, as he assumes Doctor Mangler shares his motives regarding profiting from his profession rather than focusing on the patients’ health and well-being. Doctor Ansola assumes the role of sage mentor when he suggests that his colleague attend Doctor Mangler’s lecture on the subject, thus giving Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza an opportunity to voice his doubts and concerns on the subject. The doctor displays his inflated sense of self when he responds: “¿Quién? ¡Yo?! ¿Rebajarme a que ese majadero me enseñe algo? ¡Vamos! Álvarez de Mendoza rebajarse hasta ese punto, no” (115). In

³² Even by 1951, when the play was finally staged, not much had changed regarding the socio-economic divide between classes. While Jorge Salazar-Carillo and Andro Nodarse-León’s study on the economic conditions of Cuba in the 1950s argues that these conditions were better than they have been under the Revolutionary government, it recognizes certain structural limitations such as uneven access to education and uneven access to capital continued to limit potential equality in the early years of the 1950s. They insist that this changes throughout the decade and that by 1958, economic conditions in the country are among some of the best in Latin America while simultaneously acknowledging that Cuba “had a lot of room for improvement in the 1950s with respect to access to educational opportunities and financing” (38).

this moment, the doctor speaks of himself in the third person, as a less than subtle reminder of the importance of his name, at least in his own mind. Again, Cid Pérez seems to be choteando not only the ego of the medical field, but also the ego of a man who is known by a reputation originally established by another, in this case his father.³³ He sees himself superior not only to his patients, but also to other pediatric doctors. He claims that he has nothing to learn from this young doctor whom he originally mentored. Rather than focus on learning something new from other, more recently established doctors (as Doctor Ansola readily admits he often does), Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza claims that because he is older and has been around longer, he automatically knows more and understands more than Doctor Mangler ever could. The name-dropping does not stop there though. When Doctor Ansola reminds him that many doctors have consulted with him throughout his career, he evokes the name of his father to reaffirm his supposed importance within the community: “Conmigo sí. Pero soy el doctor Diego Álvarez de Mendoza, hijo de aquel gran clínico que se llamó doctor Luis Álvarez de Mendoza, orgullo de Cuba y del mundo entero” (116). In this way Cid Pérez brings our attention to nepotism in Cuba. Is our doctor simply considered a great doctor because of his father’s reputation? What has he done to earn this reputation for himself? And at what cost will he try to hold on to this reputation? Perhaps that of his own son’s life?

Moments after Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza declares that he does not believe in this epidemic, and after he swears on his son’s life that it does not exist, his wife, Angélica, comes running into the room with their son in her arms, claiming that Luisito has fallen ill with the same disease whose existence her husband has just denied. Obviously, this is done for dramatic impact, and the timing is perfect. At the end of the first act it was understood that, to Doctor

³³ It was established in Act I that Dr. Álvarez de Mendoza’s father was also a pediatrician, a field that our doctor entered into in order to follow in his father’s footsteps, and a wish he also has for his own son Luisito (92).

Álvarez de Mendoza, his son's life is more important to him than that of anyone else, and now, in the second act, this same son has fallen ill with a sickness that the father claims does not exist. Here Cid Pérez is choteando with the audience using the doctor and his lack of faith as his target. Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza does not realize that he is the victim of choteo, as it is his creator (Cid Pérez) who mocks him and his lack of belief in a creator (God). The doctor believes he has the ability to make his own choices, but the audience and Cid Pérez both know that he does not. Just as the other characters claim that God has the last word, the audience knows that the playwright is the one who will make the final call as to the consequences of the doctor's actions. Even at this point Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza continues to deny the existence of the disease. He claims that it is nothing more than a form of gastroenteritis, and he leaves to obtain the ingredients he needs to "cure" his son. Using dramatic irony in conjunction with cultural choteo, Cid Pérez openly mocks the doctor and leaves the audience expecting the worst.

Toward the end of the second act Doctor Mangler finally makes his appearance on the stage. And it is worth asking if his character also embodies a target of choteo? He is described as "*...un hombre de aspecto vulgar, jorobado, tipo que todo parece menos un profesional*" (123).³⁴ Is this the problem that Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza has with Doctor Mangler, that he does not *look* the part of a professional? If this is the case, perhaps it is a commentary on the fact that there is judgment of those in the medical field who may not maintain a certain appearance. Perhaps Cid Pérez comments on the judgment and lack of trust for those doctors who do not look

³⁴ To an English speaker, it would be possible to entertain the idea that even the last name of this character could be interpreted as choteo, considering the description that he is given and the idea that a doctor with that last name may not be granted the authority he deserves. However, in Spanish, the term "mangle" refers to a mangrove tree common in Cuba. This tree is recognized as having curative features and being the home of many lifeforms. It is also known to have strong roots and to be able to withstand any storm, no matter how fierce. Perhaps this is a play on how Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza does not have confidence in a man who is strong, confident, flexible, and maintains life. Choteo is often connected with plays on words and this would be a perfect example of a tongue-in-cheek choteo with the audience.

the part even if they are more than qualified. If Doctor Mangler is also the first in his family to become a doctor, then this is another problem for Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza. For our egotistical doctor, it seems as though there is more value in a name than in the skills of a doctor, or at the very least, that it is the name that denotes the ability of the individual. This issue of nepotism and discrimination from within the medical field is just another critique that Cid Pérez makes regarding many doctors in Cuba at this time.

Pride ties everything together at the end of Act II when Elisa tells her son, “No seas orgulloso, hijo...,” and he responds with “¡Cómo no, madre! Si ya es notorio que sólo en ciencias médicas hay un nombre en Cuba por encima de todos, que la gloria ha mimado en dos generaciones: el ilustre nombre de los ‘Álvarez de Mendoza’” (128). The humor in these lines may be difficult to perceive, especially at a textual level. If anything, these words come across as mildly pathetic. It is disheartening to see the ego of a man take over at the risk of his own son’s life and tragic to see pride win out over medical advancement. But these lines are almost too depressing. It reaches the point where the audience needs to laugh in order not to cry over this situation. Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza’s claims are so outrageous that one cannot help but laugh at him and to mock his actions as those of a child. And upon further analysis, it is understood that this is not just one man, but rather the state of the medical field in Cuba that is being represented, or more specifically, mocked, by the inclusion of the egotistical doctor in this play.

In the third and final act, a mother and her young son arrive at the doctor’s house. It is clear to all those present (and perhaps also to the audience) that the child suffers from the same illness as the doctor’s son did in the previous act. Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza believes that he cured his son and tells this woman that he can also save her son using the same method. What he fails to realize is that his son never received the cure that he created because Doctor Ansola

feigned giving it to Luisito. Clearly, the person whom this woman and her son need to see is Doctor Mangler.

Prior to this scene there has been ample debate among Angélica, Elisa, and Doctor Ansola regarding whether or not they should tell Doctor Álvarez de Mendoza the truth about his son's recovery. The egotistical doctor has every intention of discrediting Doctor Mangler because he does not know the truth about his son's cure. And when Doctor Ansola asks her why she chooses to remain silent, Elisa, the doctor's mother, responds with "¿Yo que voy a hacer, doctor Ansola? Callar y sufrir" (135). She knows what is right and what should be done, but she also emphasizes her position as a woman.

Cultural choteo here plays into the idea that it is more proper for women to remain silent and suffer rather than stand up for what is right. Would audiences of the time have found this funny? This remains unknown since there is no record that the production was staged until many years later, but keeping in mind that Cid Pérez was considered a suffragist and sympathizer of women's rights, it is unlikely that this line was meant to be accepted without question (Davis 13). It would depend on its delivery. If it was presented melancholically, it would likely not be received as humor, but if the tone were more aggressive this line could almost be considered a challenge: a challenge to the audience to question the acceptability of a woman needing to simply "callar y sufrir," and this could definitely be considered choteo. And while Elisa gives the impression that she accepts this duty, Angélica questions this socially accepted role for women and decides she must confront her husband. Of course, this does not take place until an innocent child's life is on the line, but nonetheless it does happen and she reveals the truth to her husband. Choteo in this third act is difficult to find, but it can be recognized in the changing role of the wife who becomes less passive as the play goes on. It can also be seen in the doctor's doubts in a

changing world and the risks he apparently is willing to take to deny this change, including putting at stake the lives of loved ones. Again, the choteo is not in the text itself but rather exists at a cultural level. It is meant to be something that the audience considers and perhaps finds funny, but not something that is necessarily humorous to the characters within the play. There is ample critique here, and the two biggest forms of social criticism and choteo are directed at the medical field and gender disparity. Addressing these issues would have been quite progressive for the 1930s and perhaps explains why it was approached via choteo. The medical field was not something that was openly critiqued by means of serious discussions during this time. The specific criticism that Cid Pérez makes is masked behind the theater and the characters in the play, but the playwright does indeed choteo against these two socially accepted norms within post-Machado Cuban society.

In his analysis of *Y quiso más la vida*, Montes Huidobro suggests that “hay que reconocer que aunque estos planteamientos son decisiones de vida o muerte algo grandilocuentes, hay validez en los mismos. E inclusive actualidad, como el caso del derecho a la vida de la mujer o del hijo, y la perspectiva masculina frente al derecho de elección de la mujer” (*Cuba detrás del telón* 201-202). On the issue of the right to life, there is potential debate between the two sides and whether, if only one of the two should survive, the mother or the child should be saved, but in regards to the latter issue on the masculine perspective, I would argue, there is only ego, and this is the criticism that Cid Pérez makes in this moment. There is no male perspective versus female perspective in these cases; there is only the perspective of one doctor in opposition to another and, in this instance, a doctor whose ego is so large it blinds him to seeing the truth about the disease that nearly kills his son. As Norman T. Gonsalves mentions in his thesis on the subject, a major theme of this play is the issue of self-pride and the enslavement of mankind by

his own self-pride (46). The idea that a man discovers his own lack of significance in this work is something that Gonsalves argues and something that supports the argument that choteo is present in this play. Cid Pérez shows that, for as important as the doctor perceived himself to be, his status was relatively inconsequential in the bigger picture, something that will be seen again with *Junto al río* by Luis Alejandro Baralt. *Y quiso más la vida*, depending on how the title is interpreted (is it the doctor who loved his life more than the well-being of others, or is it life that wanted more from the doctor?), however, takes into consideration both a resignation to this lack of significance as well as a reduction of the supposed greatness of mankind.

Junto al río: Choteo, Politics, and the Status Quo

Another play that demonstrated attempts by its author to initiate change in Cuba is *Junto al río*, by Luis Alejandro Baralt, written in 1938. Baralt's lyricism is seen in many of his dramatic works, including *La luna en el pantano* (1936) and *Tragedia indiana* (published 1959).³⁵ *Junto al río* is no exception even though it appears to deal less with the intimate and more with the social and political.

Luis Alejandro Baralt Zacharie (1892-1969) was born in the United States to a Cuban father and an American mother. His father was a Cuban journalist whose profession brought the family to the United States. They returned to Cuba when Baralt was still young, and he completed all of his schooling on the island. He remained in Cuba until 1960, when he returned to the United States to teach at Southern Illinois University. In addition to being a university professor, he was also a well-known playwright and a theater director known for creating "La

³⁵ "Todas sus piezas poseen un mínimo de bondades, acrecentadas por esa mágica atmósfera de poesía, expresada bellamente por Baralt" (Escarpanter Fernández 156).

Cueva,” Teatro de Arte in Havana in 1936, in an attempt to produce a contemporary vernacular national theater establishment (Ichaso, “Nuestra escena” 33-35).

Baralt argued that he was not a writer with a radical or revolutionary mentality, nor was he a defender of women’s rights. Even though a political revolution is a primary plot point in *Junto al río*, its political message is not immediately clear. However, once that message is uncovered, it is impossible to consider it unintentional. Montes Huidobro, for one, considers *Junto al río* to be a more political play than it might seem at first glance. In his book *El teatro cubano durante la República: Cuba detrás del telón*, Montes Huidobro titles his chapter about the playwright, “El radicalismo soterrado de Luis Alejandro Baralt,” and focuses specifically on the “soterrado” aspect of the radical in the works of Baralt. He sees Baralt’s radicalism as perhaps a bit *too* hidden to be effective, but, nonetheless, he acknowledges its presence.³⁶ Perhaps this is why critics such as Natividad González Freire do not presume that this play is political, even though politics are undoubtedly a part of the story and it takes place during the final years of Machado’s regime. She considers the work to be a piece of ethical or social theater and contends that Baralt uses the love and emotions of Sol to focus on the post-revolutionary problems in Cuba and present to the audience the cycle of repetition in Cuban politics of going from one authoritarian government to the next (González Freire *Teatro cubano contemporáneo (1928-1957)* 63-64). The two young revolutionaries in *Junto al río* are the objects of the play’s critique, in particular their actions after the end of the revolution. One goes on to become a glorified politician who, despite doing little during the actual battle, now holds a position of

³⁶ “En mi opinión, *Junto al río* es mucho más política de lo que a primera vista pudiera parecer, aunque ciertamente la política se diluye en otras direcciones, no necesariamente favorables a la obra. Ubicada durante un período crítico de la historia de Cuba, Baralt, aunque lo expone, no se deja arrastrar por la violencia del momento, lo cual le resta intensidad” (Montes Huidobro, *Cuba detrás del telón* 287-8).

power, and the other, who fought hard, seems unable to take the next steps in implementing social and political changes after the revolution.

Junto al río may not seem comedic at first, but that is part of the choteo. The opening scene shows Don Juan, an older man who lives in a home on the outskirts of town with his adopted daughter, Sol. He lives a simple life and does not want any trouble, but it finds him anyway in the form of Ambrosio, a young revolutionary who seeks refuge. Sol falls in love with Ambrosio and believes that he feels the same. When he departs with his brother Abelardo, he leaves her with the impression that he will return for her one day. After the revolutionaries have been gone for some time, Sol is seen by the river fishing and thinking about Ambrosio. When she sees him, she calls out, but Ambrosio does not recognize her immediately. After Sol is rejected by the young man she decides to throw her purity aside and begin a new life. Years later, Sol returns carrying her young daughter, Estrella. She insists that she does not know who the father is nor does she wish to find out. The fifth scene takes place six or eight years later. Ambrosio is now a leader in the new government. Many changes are coming, and this includes the removal of people like Don Juan from their homes. In the final scene, Don Juan is forced to move out of his house and Abelardo has killed Ambrosio. Abelardo returns to say goodbye to Don Juan and have one last moment together before Don Juan dies and the police come and take Abelardo away for killing his brother.

There is a sadness to the humor used in this play, and that is the social and cultural choteo at work. The characters do not laugh, but the critique and the choteo here are intended for the audience and not for the characters themselves. It is the characters' actions, and not their words, that might cause laughter for the audience. I suspect that audiences would simultaneously enjoy the downfall of these characters and be appalled by their actions. While I was unable to find any

accounts of audience reception, I suggest that choteo is used here to make the audience simultaneously laugh and feel repulsed.³⁷ The situations in which our characters find themselves seem humorous at first glance, but when the true meaning is considered, it potentially impacts audience aversion.

I argue that although they are subtle, the radical elements found in this play demonstrate that Baralt was intentional in his use of choteo in *Junto al río*. However, he found it difficult to speak openly about his radicalism, something that, as previously mentioned, he claimed he did not possess. This hidden (“*soterrado*”) radicalism makes identifying cultural choteo a little more difficult, but all the more important because the text’s subtleties reflect the newly emerging approaches to incorporating choteo in the theater. Choteo within the dialogue is certainly easier to ascertain, but such choteo does not always delve into the social complexities of the time.

Junto al río (later retitled *La luna en el río* for unknown reasons³⁸) was staged for the first time on June 7, 1938, at the Teatro Principal de la Comedia, and was, during the same year, awarded second place in a competition held by the Secretary of Education called *Teatro de selección*. It is a play that openly deals with social and political concerns within Cuba at that time. The work marks departure from Baralt’s earlier work, *La luna en el pantano*, which dealt with more intimate and personal themes. In *Junto al río*, Baralt focuses on the both the social and political turmoil within the country by writing about life under the Machado regime. And although he never openly identifies it as such within the text itself, the setting’s description at the

³⁷ The only performance review that I found was Francisco Ichaso’s commentary in the March 19, 1936 edition of *Diario de la Marina*, which makes no mention of the presence or absence of humor in the play.

³⁸ The first use of the new title can be found in the 1960 publication *Teatro cubano* released by the Universidad Central de Las Villas. Other titles in this publication include *Réquiem por Yarini* by Carlos Felipe, and *La alegre noticia*, by Samuel Feijóo. I suggest that this renaming of the play was intended to make a connection to Baralt’s earlier play *La luna en el pantano* (1936). Throughout this study I will refer to the play by its original title, although citations are taken from this 1960 edition.

beginning of the play describes “acción y tiempo en Cuba durante la revolución contra Machado y poco después. No se ha de ver en la trama ni en los caracteres alusión alguna a sucesos y personajes ciertos” (Baralt 108). Baralt makes it clear that he wants actors, readers, and audience members to understand the time and place of his work, but he does not name names, nor does he include historical elements. This allows him to create an authentic feel to the play without compromising specific individuals or putting himself at risk for potential censorship.

The opening scene of *Junto al río* introduces Don Juan, an older, self-proclaimed hermit, who lives in a cave and has taken in a young girl, Sol, and raised her as if she were his own daughter. They live a relatively secluded life although they do interact with others in the community. One of these individuals is José Andino, a young sailor who lives in the area and looks to Don Juan as an uncle figure and, albeit a few years older than her, is clearly in love with Sol. José’s intentions are established early in the first act when he comes by to pay a visit to Don Juan and Sol. Sixteen-year-old Sol cries out, “¡A que no me dejas montarme a caballito, como antes!” (114), causing embarrassment for her suitor. It is clear that even at this point, when she has yet to acknowledge her understanding of José’s feelings, she has made him the victim of choteo. She knows that comments such as these make him uncomfortable and she uses her words in jest. She may be flirting with him, even if she does not recognize this in her actions, or she may simply be teasing him for her own amusement.

While this choteo is less the anti-authoritarian choteo that I will primarily focus on in this study, it does deal with the humiliation of its target, José. This is further evidenced as Sol realizes that José has feelings for her as a woman and not just as a little sister: “¡Ah, ya sé! ¡Es que se ha enamorado de mí! ¿No dicen que cuando la gente se enamora se les sube y se les baja la sangre...?” (115). Again, this choteo is not necessarily malicious in intent, but it causes

humiliation for her target and she uses it to make light of a serious situation. Although this example exists at an individual rather than social level, it connects directly to Beals's argument in which he states that "Cuban *choteo* is not so penetrating, more on the surface, less sophisticated, more childish. Not so instinct with life's complexities, its lower forms are merely impish" (86). The interaction comes to an end with a simple "Adiós, linda" from José and an "Adiós, feo" from Sol. This last bit is debatable as to whether or not it is actually *choteo* or simply a mild teasing. I would lean toward categorizing it under *choteo* because later on, after José has gone, Don Juan refers to Sol as a "picarona." In Hidalgo's 2012 study of *choteo*, he explains that *choteo* is often compared to the Spanish picaresque (*Irreverencia y humor* 77). The term *choteador* was certainly not in common use at the time that Baralt wrote this play, and as such would not be a word that Don Juan would use. He would default to a more familiar term to himself, *pícaro*, or in the case of his adopted daughter, *picarona*. Baralt acknowledges what Sol is doing, but his word choice reflects his preferred subtleties when writing about socially or politically sensitive topics.

That does not mean there is no social or political *choteo* within this play, however. There are many occasions where the play criticizes issues around schooling, social class, and the government. With the recent end of a dictatorship, these comments are probably quite relatable to a 1938 audience. At that time in Cuba, there were attempts to change the social status quo, particularly in relation to social class, gender, and race. I contend that *Junto al río* touches on all three of these at one point or another. In the first act alone, Don Juan complains about one of his neighbors as he discusses with José the impending arrival of the Nautical Club to the area: "habría que ver que me pusiesen ahí un adefesio, como el que me ha hecho el ricacho ese de enfrente, que encima de tumbar los mejores árboles de aquella parte, todavía se le ocurre pintar

su palacio de crocantería de un nauseabundo color salmón” (Baralt 114). First of all, Don Juan’s choice of the word *ricacho* allows us to see that he does not hold this individual in high esteem, even though he is supposedly wealthy. And while the word can simply refer to the fabulous wealth of an individual, it can also be a term used to refer to someone that is considered a “dirty capitalist.” Don Juan himself may not be using choteo, but I contend that Baralt has included this line in the text to choteo with his audience. This line would most likely have elicited some sort of reaction out of the audience, and although there does not appear to be evidence in reviews of the production that either prove or disprove this theory, it clearly criticizes individuals within the upper social classes in Cuba. I maintain that the use of the word *crocantería* is an intentional error that reflects Don Juan’s social class and perhaps lack of knowledge of the actual word, *chocantería*, that is likely intended here.³⁹ This line criticizes not only the capitalist actions of the individual such as cutting down the trees, but also the aesthetic taste of a person who would choose a color as nauseating as “pink salmon” to paint his house. The use of choteo here is by a man of a lower class against one of an upper class; it thus uses humor to bring the upper-class individual down and to remove his position of authority over Don Juan. Don Juan has evidently experienced conflict with his neighbor at one point or another, but again, it is unlikely that Don Juan recognizes himself as being humorous here indicating more of a cultural choteo than a textual choteo.

The end of the first scene, presents one of the first instances of cultural choteo directed toward society at large. Don Juan asks, “¿Qué el gobierno roba y mata? Allá ellos. Yo no robo,

³⁹ It is also possible that this word could be one that Don Juan creates out of combining “crocante” and “chocantería” as the color of the house might be somewhat similar to that of the almond and caramel candy. Even if this is the case, which I consider unlikely given Don Juan’s social class, his invention of words here would still be something that could evoke laughter from the audience and/or reader. The original manuscript of the play, accessed at the Biblioteca Nacional José Martí in Havana in September 2016, confirms that this is not a simple typographical error that appeared in the 1960 edition of the play.

ni mato. ¿Qué el odio roe a los hombres, que se entremuerden como lobos, por tener cada cual más automóviles, mejores chalets? ¿Qué la envidia les quita el sueño y la dispepsia les hincha el vientre? Allá ellos” (119). While Don Juan is criticizing the government in this instance, he is not actually choteando. In this case, the choteo is delivered, as mentioned, to the audience and even to society at large. Here Don Juan is the equivalent of an ostrich sticking his head in the sand. He does not want to deal with these societal “norms” so he chooses not to; he separates himself from the rest of society as best as he is able. This criticism comes from beyond the text and is delivered by Baralt, via Don Juan, to the audience. Don Juan’s behavior is intended to be humorous, but it may also be something that the spectators recognize in themselves. By having a character who considers himself outside of the norms of the social order deliver these lines, rather than someone who actively supports or opposes the government, it makes them less objectionable to the authorities who may or may not decide to censor the work.

One would not expect that the audience would necessarily agree or disagree with Don Juan. In fact, they would most likely consider themselves dissimilar to him because he appears to be outside of the social order to a certain degree and they do not see themselves the same way. However, *this* is the choteo. The audience *is* Don Juan, whether they recognize it or not. By laughing at Don Juan they are acknowledging that there is truth in what he says and truth in the relationship of Cuban citizens with their government reflected in this character. This is an interesting use of cultural choteo because it is not necessarily critiquing authority, but rather society in general. It thus focuses on the resignation felt on a broader level. Such choteo could still be considered subversive since it is intended to reflect the thoughts of many individuals within Cuban society, but Baralt’s dramaturgical preferences allow for this work to fly under the radar of the censors.

In the second scene, criticism of the government is expressed via the voice of the young revolutionary, Ambrosio, who has recently stumbled onto the doorstep of Don Juan's cave, as he converses with Sol. He quotes Don Juan to her saying, "Qué cada cual haga como él, me dice, que resuelva su problema interior, y todos los demás problemas quedarán resueltos" (122). This is a reflection of Don Juan's philosophy of life. He believes that everyone should simply take care of their own affairs and not depend on anyone else to solve their problems, not the government, and not the revolution. Don Juan speaks here what many Cubans may have felt: that they were on their own and that there was no outside support.⁴⁰ The government was not to be counted on to make social changes especially as they related to the needs of the majority, be they related to race, gender, or the vast differences in social classes among Cuban citizens. Here, in the second act, there is also what I consider a blatant criticism of Machado as Ambrosio continues his revolutionary discourse with Sol: "Es necesario que Cuba deje de ser una factoría que los malos patriotas, vendidos al oro de Wall Street, tienen sometida al imperialismo yanqui" (123). In 1938, it is quite apparent that although Machado had been removed from power, little had changed in the way of Cuba being a "factory run by bad patriots" in Baralt's opinion. By including this segment in the play, Baralt acknowledges the lack of fundamental structural change from one regime to the next.

While it is clear in the play that Baralt is challenging the success of the revolution, it is José Andino who denounces the inactivity of these so-called revolutionaries later in the same act, after Ambrosio has left with his brother, Abelardo. After learning who Ambrosio and Abelardo are, José tells Don Juan, "Esos muchachos son unos ilusos. Se creen que van a arreglar el mundo,

⁴⁰ An alternative interpretation could be that Cuban's may have seen what they wished for from their own government, a freedom that to this point had not been available to them. This would still speak to the idea that the government was not providing its citizens with what they needed most.

y para mí que todo va a seguir igual, aunque ganen” (131). Here José expresses the resignation felt by many at this time. The reality for most individuals during this transition was that Machado’s removal changed little to nothing for the common person. These lines critique those who see themselves as superior to the average citizen, but they also reflect the mentality that little to nothing can be done about inducing actual change. I would also suggest that even if this scene does not show choteo, it does introduce the problem in a way that opens the door to choteo later in the play.

In the third scene, much of the choteo appears to be directed at late-1930s social expectations of gender. This scene deals with the “fall” of Sol. The revolutionaries have been gone for some time and Sol is found sitting by the river fishing. She is still thinking about Ambrosio. Here she encounters a young woman named Chefa. Even if Chefa’s actual role in society is never explicitly stated, Baralt describes her attire as “impropio para el lugar y la hora” and explains that “todo delata en ella a la cabaretera o muchacha de ‘academia de baile” (137). If Sol represents chastity and innocence, Chefa depicts impurity and experience. She tries to talk to Sol about joining her at the dance hall and meeting up with some of the young men from the Nautical Club, but Sol is not interested. Some of these young men arrive and she rejects them. When she sees Ambrosio appear, she calls out to him, although he does not recognize her immediately. She feels rejected by him as he no longer seems interested in her as he had before he went off to fight. With this new knowledge, she decides to throw her purity aside and leave with Chefa and the other young men. She transitions from her role as “the virgin” to that of “the whore,” and it seems as though, once she has fallen, she has no other choice but to remain in that position. It looks as if even after her initial refusal to join them, Sol has in fact fallen victim to

the choteo of Chefa and these young men; she gives in, joins them, and then “falls” from society’s graces.

Chefa’s choteo starts out as slightly self-deprecating when she tells Sol, “Con un poco de maña y no botando lo que se gana, ya verás qué pronto se ‘forra’ una. Aprenderás conmigo, que mi trabajo me ha costado cogerle el juego al negocito este” (139). Chefa is choteando herself as well as Sol, but this is also Baralt’s choteo. Here he comments on Chefa’s “business,” and I see this as choteo directed at society and their lack of acceptance of the socially directed possibilities for women at the time. It is humorous the way in which Chefa presents herself, but it is also a critique of the position of women within Cuba society at that time. Faced with limited opportunities, women could choose to be, like Sol, a virginal woman, or like Chefa, the village “whore.” Baralt purposefully draws attention to these limitations in his contrasting portrayals of the two women in order to critique the status quo.

Moments later, in the same scene, Don Juan uses choteo with Chefa. Again, it is uncertain whether he is aware of his humor, but it is likely that this interaction would elicit amusement from the audiences of that time:

Chefa. *(Al pasarle Don Juan por el lado.)* Adiós, Don Juan. ¿Cómo andan esos chivos?

D. Juan. Bien, gracias. ¿Y los tuyos?

Chefa. ¿Los míos? *(Cayendo en cuenta.)* Mire, Don Juan, métase en lo que le importe.

(139)

Here of course, Don Juan’s chivos are actual goats, while Chefa’s chivos would be a reference to her “negocio.” It is interesting as well to notice the impact, or lack thereof, that this choteo has

on Chefa. Given her social position, one based on her limited options as a woman, she has probably heard these types of comments before. She is accustomed to insults and humor. In this scene the remark catches her off guard because of who the speaker is. Don Juan is not known for his wit, and therefore this comment from him is unexpected for Chefa, as it would be for the audience as well. And as much as this choteo seems to simply demonstrate a lack of respect for the target (Chefa in this case), its presence in the play indicates so much more. Baralt's inclusion of this line reflects how society viewed women, and how even men who considered themselves marginalized from society viewed these women. Don Juan's comment is meant to discredit Chefa and reduce her or humiliate her, but since she has already been reduced by society, it appears to have minimal impact on her. To Don Juan, Sol is pure and Chefa is immoral. She is *something* to be avoided at all costs, especially by Sol. Here Chefa functions as a conduit for choteo. She brings an element of humor to the play through her behavior and interactions with other characters in a way that no other character does.

Perhaps it is this comment from Don Juan that drives Chefa to push Sol even more when the time comes and the young sportsmen arrive. She takes her game (and her choteo) to the next level. After Don Juan exits, Chefa and the young men dialogue with Sol (who is present but not speaking at this point) as the subject of their conversation:

Chefa. ¡Ya está! ¡Qué idea! ¿Tú no decías que con una sola mujer a bordo iba a correr la sangre? Pues llevamos a ésta [Sol], y así habrá menos bronca.

1er Deport. ¡Justo! ¡A más carne, menos carnicería!

Ambrosio. No. Eso no. Esta se queda aquí.

1er Deport. ¡No veo por qué! La chiquita es mona, y tiene cara de ser bien lista.

Ambrosio. Digo que no, y no hablemos más del asunto.

2do Deport. *(Al primero.)* Es cuestión de autoridad, viejo. *(A Ambrosio.)* Te felicito, tú técnica amatoria es de una rapidez sorprendente.

1er Deport. *(Irónico.)* ¡Ah, ya caigo...! Es que se trata de su novia... No te olvides de invitarme a la boda.

2do Deport. Me permitirás que le regale a la novia la corona de azahar, símbolo de la pureza...

1er Deport. Y yo el velo nupcial, símbolo de la virginidad.

2do Deport. Y que levante mi copa por la felicidad eterna de la enamorada pareja. ¡A ver! ¡Una copa en seguida para el novio y otra para la novia! *(Chefa da su copa a Sol y el primer deportista va a dar la suya a Ambrosio pero éste no la toma.)*

Ambrosio. *(Muy incomodado.)* ¡Basta ya! ¡Déjennos en paz! (144-45)

This is the variety of choteo that pushes Sol to change her ways and lose her innocence. In this scene, her choteadores take their mockery so far that they drive her to try alcohol, something she had previously never done. Perhaps this could simply be regarded as peer pressure, but there may be something more to it as they attempt to shatter her purity. As a virginal woman, Sol can be perceived as having a “greatness” that the others do not. And since, as a general rule, choteo is intended to discredit the other and reduce or humiliate the target, this could easily be considered choteo. Sol possesses social superiority, intentional or not (and here I would argue that it is not), over this group of individuals, and they feel the need to use humor to diminish her perceived perfection. During this interaction they also simultaneously critique Ambrosio and his supposed authority over Sol. This is why they refer to the two as *novios* when they clearly are not. There is

a textual critique of men who are unable to control their women together with a social critique of women who must obey the men in their lives without question.

This choteo could also be an issue of social class as well as gender. Sol is not wealthy and she does not hold any position of power. Chefa and the group of young men try to claim power over whatever they are able to, and since they are unable to assert their control over those above them, they turn their focus to easily targeted and innocent individuals such as Sol. But above all, it appears that her gender is the target of their choteo. So when Ambrosio attempts to defend her, his support falls short. Sol rejects and criticizes him and instead turns to her oppressors for comfort from the pain of Ambrosio's rejection of her love. Instead of allowing Ambrosio to continue being a target of the others, she tells them "¡Déjenlo!" But she does not stop there, and what at first appears to be a plea in his favor quickly turns into an attack: "Ya se entretendrá escribiendo su discurso político; después de todo es lo único que puede interesarle, y tiene tantas cosas que decir y tanto que explicar..." (148). This appears to be a defense mechanism utilized by Sol but one disguised with choteo. She tries not to show the pain from her discovery that Ambrosio does not, and likely never did, care for her the way she cares for him. As with Don Juan, choteo does not come naturally or easily to Sol, and so she may not recognize it as such, but her audience (Chefa and the young men from the Nautical Club) and the audience of the play would identify this humor in her words.

The fourth scene supplies very little in the way of humor, but the choteo here is used as a criticism against racism and society. According to Alejandro de la Fuente, "Racial division [in early republican Cuba] permeated the nascent labor movement; white workers in at least some sectors would have benefited from a system that kept blacks out of competition" (12). But Baralt demonstrates how this is changing through Indalecio, a minor character in the play. Indalecio is a

poor man whom Baralt describes as “mulato casi negro” (155). He is an intelligent man but he is also labeled as “un tipo de trabajador ignorante” (155). When he recounts to Don Juan how he has lost his job, Indalecio tells him that “eso no es lo peor; sino que le han dado mi puesto a un negrito colorado él, de pelo planchado que no sabe ni coger una escoba” (156). Again, the character, in this case Indalecio, does not necessarily intend his own use of choteo, rather it is Baralt’s attempt at a cultural choteo to criticize racial intolerances in Cuba. Indalecio, who is described as “almost black,” is upset about a black man getting his job. Afro-Cubans in general found it difficult to obtain jobs in particular sectors during the Republic, so it is not surprising that the *mulatos* who had previously done these jobs were being dismissed and replaced. Without the education or skills to take on a new job, they were often left unemployed. Of course, Indalecio is concerned with having lost his job, but as he says, that is not even the worst of it, as he proceeds to insult this black man. The scene serves to demonstrate racial intolerances in Cuba while simultaneously critiquing a system that replaces qualified workers with those who are not as qualified, simply to demonstrate a false equality.⁴¹ It seems as though, even at this point in history, the calls for equality made by the *Partido Independiente de Cuba* in 1908 were not being met or were being grossly misconstrued (Chomsky, et. al. 163-65).⁴²

Indalecio is also the character that Baralt uses to criticize the Cuban authorities when he describes the upward movement of Ambrosio in the Cuban government. He tells Don Juan, “Ese ha subido como la espuma. Ya está pegado al jamón grande. Ahora, para mí que se ha vendido,

⁴¹ Two sources that go into great detail on this subject include *A Nation for All Race Inequality, and Politics in Twentieth-Century Cuba* by Alejandro de la Fuente, and *Measures of Equality Social Science, Citizenship, and Race in Cuba, 1902-1940* by Alejandra Bronfman.

⁴² *The Cuba Reader* edited by Aviva Chomsky, et. al. includes translations of various documents that discuss the movement established by the *Partido Independiente de Cuba* and how they associated racism with colonialism (163). It also recounts how black Cubans were employed on the docks as strike breakers and how they then remained as workers (215). This, while not the exact example given by Indalecio, shows how working conditions and racial intolerance were often directly linked to one another.

porque ese era de los que mordían. Y después crea usted en revolucionarios... Los cubanos todos son iguales..." (158). This choteo is presented on a cultural level. Baralt gives the impression that all Cubans are the same and that therefore no changes are made from one regime to the next. This is blatant choteo against Machado and his regime, but also of Cubans in general, since they allow this lack of change to remain the norm. What makes this scene particularly humorous is the assumption that the audience would wish to separate themselves from "all Cubans" in this instance, laughing at the absurdity of the situation while simultaneously recognizing the reality of it. I see Baralt using humor as a way to attempt to bring about change in his country, even when it seemed impossible to do so.

Again, in the fifth scene, which is set approximately six to eight years later than the previous scene, there is very little choteo between characters. One instance, however, is when José asks Don Juan, "¿Qué quiere usted? Hay que dejar paso al progreso." And Don Juan retorts, "Si fuera para mejorar esto, para embellecerlo... pero lo dudo" (166). This response from Don Juan acknowledges a lack of change at all, let alone for the better. Don Juan, as I have mentioned, is not known as a choteador, but he does make this remark, and, depending on how it is interpreted, it could be understood as choteo. Don Juan's delivery of this line would determine the effectiveness of this choteo as presented on a more cultural level. Whether or not the words would be considered choteo would be largely determined by the actor representing Don Juan and that actor's ability or desire to perform this line with choteo.

Ambrosio, in this fifth scene, employs what could be considered the clearest example of character choteo in the play. It is in this scene that Ambrosio recalls staying in one of the caves in the area during the early days of the revolution. Interestingly, even though this was the point of origin for who he has become, he is prepared to destroy this location in order to build his park,

which will, presumably, pay homage to him as well as to other revolutionaries. In the midst of this discussion he reencounters Don Juan for the first time since he had taken refuge in his cave home when fleeing the authorities so many years before. After a brief moment of confusion as to who this old man is, Ambrosio recalls:

Ambrosio. Es...sí, es... ¿Cómo no lo iba a reconocer? Cuando yo veo una cara no se me olvida más. Miren, amigos. Les decía ahora mismo que en una de esas cuevas me había escondido cuando la revolución. Pues este buen hombre que ven aquí era el *castellano* de aquel *castillo* inexpugnable. (*Se ríen.*) ¡No, no ríen! Si no es por él, me cogen seguro y no estaría aquí para hacer el cuento. Le debo la vida. Así como suena: le debo la vida.

Este... (*Buscando el nombre.*) Don...

D. Juan. Juan.

Ambrosio. Eso. ¡Don Juan! (173)⁴³

Ambrosio's words here coincide with what we understand as choteo when he refers to Don Juan as "castellano" and to his cave home as a "castillo" – neither of which is true. Everyone that accompanies Ambrosio laughs at this point, indicating their understanding of his joke. And, of course, after they hear that his name is "Don Juan," they get another laugh, since our character does not appear in any way to resemble the legendary Don Juan of Spanish literature. While the characters on stage find humor in this situation, I suspect that there would be little laughter from the audience in this moment since they have been conditioned to sympathize with Don Juan and to feel hostility toward Ambrosio. After he makes this "joke" about Don Juan and the old man's

⁴³ Emphasis in spoken text is my own; stylistics in the stage directions belong to the author.

home, and after he elicits laughter from his own onstage audience, Ambrosio instructs them not to laugh, and he defends Don Juan, even though it is apparent he does not remember him by name (173). The delivery of these lines is crucial, because it is necessary to recognize whether or not Ambrosio's defense is sincere or whether there is still a tone of choteo in his voice. I argue that the choteo remains, because, whether or not he recognizes his insult, Ambrosio speaks those words with the intention of eliciting laughter from his audience and appearing superior to Don Juan.

In the sixth and final scene there is arguably no choteo spoken by the characters. *Junto al río* ends tragically, magnifying the continuing troubles of the Cuban people after the failure of the revolution to make any substantial changes in the post-Machado years. Montes Huidobro explains that “Baralt contradice el postulado histórico, pero a través de don Juan y sus concepciones idílicas, muestra de entrada su falta de fe en la acción política, que, desde cierta perspectiva puede considerarse un hacer político” (*Cuba detrás del telón* 288). This statement does not imply that Montes Huidobro supports the idea that Baralt uses choteo to achieve a specific political act, but I argue that it, in fact, does. Not only does the author use Don Juan to drive home his lack of trust of those in power, but he also uses Abelardo (who has just killed his own brother, Ambrosio) to demonstrate his own political position: “Matar un hermano es un crimen horrendo que debo, que quiero expiar. Peor matar una idea, matar un pueblo en el espíritu, castrarlo, inocularlo con el virus de la derrota, es mil veces peor” (Baralt 184). This is Baralt's thesis. This is the revolutionary idea that he does not want to see die. I suggest that it is clear that for Baralt, even with Machado out of power, nothing has really changed within Cuba, and that the revolutionary ideas held prior to the ousting of the former dictator have died since new authority figures have come into power.

However, Baralt did not wish to be openly political, and, as Montes Huidobro insists, “*La luna en el río* es, eminentemente, una obra política...” even if the author did not wish it to be expressly so. Montes Huidobro proceeds by suggesting “...y es lástima que, por no querer identificar a Baralt con preocupaciones ideológicas que han sido parte intrínseca de la vida cubana, se le reduzca a la distinción y la elegancia” (*Cuba detrás del telón* 294).⁴⁴ Perhaps Baralt did not wish to identify with Cuban political ideologies, but, unlike Montes Huidobro, I do not see a reduction in the distinction and elegance of this piece. In fact, examining the use of choteo in the theater as part of the analysis of this play allows for the consideration of a higher level of distinction and elegance of the work than would be possible by excluding such an investigation. José Antonio Escarpanter Fernández claims that “aunque aparecen algunos aspectos de la problemática cubana, como el fracaso de la revolución, la obra abunda en detalles accesorios que más que ser factores integradores del conjunto, le comunican un carácter episódico a la acción” (159-60). And while there is definitely an element of the “episodic” in this play, it does not detract from the discussion of the “problemática cubana.” If anything, it magnifies its relevance by covering a span of time of at least a decade. Here I contend that Baralt has not gone far enough in his attempt to convey this message of systemic failure in Cuba. Perhaps that was because the author was not completely comfortable serving as the bearer of this message. And perhaps this assessment is true of the major characters, but the episodic nature of this play across six scenes allows for the introduction of minor characters that demonstrate the cultural choteo beyond the text. Characters such as Indalecio and Chefa serve important purposes, even if they make only brief appearances. Such characters address the social issues related to gender and race prevalent in Baralt’s Cuba of the 1930s. Through these characters, Baralt can chotear with the

⁴⁴ Here Montes Huidobro refers to the play under its second title *La luna en el río*, instead of its original title *Junto al río*.

reader or the audience in ways that he could not do with characters such as Don Juan or Sol. Montes Huidobro reveals that Baralt did not believe himself to have a radical or revolutionary mentality, nor was he a defender of women's rights (*Cuba detrás del telón* 281), but he contends that this was not completely true, just that Baralt was not open about his radicalism. In fact, the title of Montes Huidobro's chapter reiterates his argument that Baralt was in fact more radical than he would openly admit. And even though I would agree with the critic that "las dificultades que presenta su teatro se deben a que Baralt, a pesar de sus preocupaciones sociales y éticas, no llega a definirse de [una] forma tajante..." (281), I argue that this is completely intentional and that this work was purposely designed not to be perceived as radical, especially by those who might be inclined to censor it based on its subject matter. Baralt was choteando against Machado and his government, but he was also choteando against contemporary conditions in Cuba, Cuban society, and Cuban authorities. He explains that nothing has really changed, and thus, the play ends on a relatively tragic note. This critique does not speak well to the then-current state of Cuba. While the play takes place in the past, it does not mean that it did not reflect Baralt's present at the time he wrote and performed this play. However, *Junto al río* is only recorded to have been performed twice between 1938 and 1960: the first, as mentioned before, in June of 1938, and the second on November 30, 1943 (González 29, 73). This second performance took place, just as the first did, at the Teatro Principal de la Comedia, and was produced under the direction of Francisco Alfonso.⁴⁵ This second performance, and I believe this is no coincidence, occurred only months after the attack on the Moncada army barracks (July 26, 1953) and that is likely to have affected how audiences understood the actions of the revolutionary characters.

⁴⁵ Paco Alfonso (1906-1989) – Actor, director, producer, and co-founder of the Teatro Cubano de Selección. He served as the director for Teatro Popular from 1943 to 1945. Some of his works include *Ayuda Guajira* (1941), *Sabanimar* (1943), *Cañaveral* (1950), and *Hierba hedionda* (1951) (Cruz-Luis 53).

Junto al río is an engaging and provocative work that addresses class structure in Cuba. It uses Don Juan as a representative of the lower class but shows how he also understands the ways and laws of nature (both human and otherwise), while those such as the young members of the Nautical Club really have no understanding of the world yet possess the money to act as though they do know. These differences in how members of different social classes behave is an essential and opportune criticism in the years following Machado's regime. *Junto al río* also attends to the issues of race and gender. By including marginal characters such as Indalecio and Chefa, Baralt is able to critique Cuban attitudes toward black Cubans and women. And though he did not delve too deeply into these subjects, there were certainly other works of the time that chose to address one or both of these issues.

El velorio de Pura: Choteo, Women, and Customs

One playwright who was able to address the expectations society held for women during the 1930s and 1940s was Flora Díaz Parrado (1893-1992), author of *El velorio de Pura* (1941). Díaz Parrado was born and raised in Cuba. As an adult, she later moved to France to serve as the first female Cuban diplomat. She remained in France after the triumph of the Revolution and later moved to Spain, where she spent the rest of her life. While she is better known for her work as a foreign diplomat, Parrado was also a noted journalist, essayist, and playwright. Her works, which were considered quite modern for their time, both demonstrate her fight for women's rights and incorporate humor, rhythm, movement, and experimentation (Boudet, "El Enigma" 88).

Humor in general is said to imply contradictions. In the case of choteo, this would explain the lack of production of plays such as *El velorio de Pura*. To the best of my knowledge,

this one-act play was staged only once, over twenty years after it was written.⁴⁶ Since choteo often challenges the authority figures in Cuba, both directly and indirectly, it is unsurprising that plays that incorporate choteo would be censored or ignored. Authority figures are often political and/or religious figures, and they have historically been male. Criticizing men as authority figures appears to be the case with Flora Díaz Parrado's play. Although her play was not overtly censored, the fact that it was not staged in its time speaks to the desire to censor the work by those in positions of power who were, more often than not, men.

This play and playwright are much less studied than either of the other two works and authors that I have analyzed in this chapter. I would argue that it is no coincidence that there is no written record that this play was staged and that it was a woman who wrote it. According to Rosa Ileana Boudet, *El velorio de Pura* is an unusual, rich, evocative, and difficult-to-classify work (*Relectura cómplice* 190). This description is, in part, connected to her other works, but it also has much to do with her position as a Cuban playwright during her time (and arguably even still). Boudet indicates that "Díaz Parrado es una olvidada y menospreciada por el canon masculino al retar a la sociedad patriarcal con su perspectiva inquisitiva, mordaz y tragicómica" (198). She insists that Díaz Parrado's use of "el bobo muerto de risa en el entierro, la posición de la saya de Pura, desafiante y procaz, enarbolada como un estandarte y el final como un delirio, es el mensaje de una mujer que se desentiende de moral y buenas costumbres" (198). And though Díaz Parrado acknowledges the existence of these morals and customs in her play, her blatant disregard for them through the use of specific characters shows us the inherent choteo in her writing.

⁴⁶ In a conversation with Cuban actor Roberto Gacio on September 20, 2016, I was informed that the play was staged in 1963 at the Teatro Sala Talía by Teatro Universitario, but I have been unable to find written evidence regarding this performance. Neither the theater group nor the location exist any longer and I was unable to track down records regarding this production. Gacio performed in this production as El bobo.

While considering the script itself, the majority of the moments of choteo occur not in the spoken words of the characters, but rather in the stage directions written by Díaz Parrado to be performed by the actresses (and, occasionally, actors) of this production. Unfortunately, without any records of the staging of *El velorio de Pura*, these moments of choteo can only be found through textual analysis.⁴⁷ But without these stage directions, readers and potential directors could have easily misinterpreted the play. Although some playwrights leave the stage directions open for interpretation by the actors and directors, others choose to be more specific in their instructions. Furthermore, without the stage directions, there would be no indication of the disregard of customs inherent in the play. In her analysis of stage directions in the plays of certain twentieth-century U.S. playwrights, Bess Rowen points out that stage directions can “either affirm or counteract the spoken dialogue that has just occurred” (131). It is not immediately evident that this play is tongue-in-cheek in its description and representation of the Cuban velorio, but I suggest that the specific stage directions included by Díaz Parrado allow for the reader to understand the intended irreverence in the dialogue. *El velorio de Pura* follows an already established tradition from the nineteenth century of making the velorio the play’s central focus. However, the approach taken by Díaz Parrado differs from that of previous authors such as Covarrubias and José Agustín Millán, who also used the velorio, in that she focuses primarily on the behaviors of the women in attendance.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ While this is, strictly speaking, true with my analysis of all of these plays, it is possible to hypothesize audience reception from plays which have a written record of performances.

⁴⁸ *Los velorios de La Habana* (1838), by Francisco Covarrubias, and *Un velorio en Jesús María* (1848), by José Agustín Millán, are just two examples of plays that use a Cuban wake as a central setting. Not a single text by Covarrubias exists today, but based on information about the author, his plays were known for their use of parody, music, choteo and the *costumbrista* tradition (Ichaso, “Nuestra escena” 23). Millán’s play has a similar setting to that of Díaz Parrado’s play; however, it opens with male characters who are choteando. The women in this play are more frequently seen as the targets of choteo rather than the choteadores.

The *velorio* as an event in which the use of *choteo* is heavy-handed has been recognized by many throughout history, even by those outside of Cuba. Beals, the US journalist and historian, makes note of the “jokes” told by Cubans during wakes and funeral activities, claiming that it is “perhaps a defiance of death, a desire to prove that the lost life-companion is still with the watchers” (90). So it should really come as no surprise that Díaz Parrado uses humor in her representation of a Cuban *velorio*. However, it is interesting to note that in the case of Pura, it is less often the *words* that are spoken by the different characters where we find the humor, but more in the *actions* of these characters and the appearance of people and things on the stage. Beals of course does not look at these “jokes” as *choteo* necessarily, as his analysis of *choteo* is much more in line with the early perspectives of Mañach in regards to this truly Cuban humor, but since the section on wakes in Beals’s book immediately follows the section on *choteo*, it is easy to make the connection between the two. This link, I contend, is related to the use of *choteo* as a coping mechanism for tough times. A wake would constitute a difficult situation for those involved, and, given what is known about the use of *choteo*, it is not surprising that there might be a connection between the two.

Any discussion surrounding Díaz Parrado and her works ranges from praise to intense criticism; however, one thing seems apparent no matter who investigates her: she had a strong desire to break from the conventional in both her writing and her life. When Susana A. Montero considers Díaz Parrado, it is as a narrative writer rather than as a playwright. She indicates that Díaz Parrado’s writing can be recognized as one of many “*narraciones de tendencia feminista*” from that time period, and it could be argued that these tendencies are applied to her later writings as well, narrative or otherwise (Montero 12). Acknowledging that she was an advocate for women’s causes in her daily life, one should not be surprised that Díaz Parrado incorporated

these elements into her writing. Additionally, not only was Díaz Parrado a distinguished speaker and writer, she had experience in diplomatic service and militant feminist activities. She was actively involved in civil life, defended a women's right to vote, campaigned for the right to asylum, and accepted lesbianism.⁴⁹

As a woman, Díaz Parrado advocated for other women through her writing via the use of humor. In *El velorio de Pura*, her incorporation of humor, and specifically choteo, shows the ways in which men perceive women's behavior and, in contrast, the ways in which women truly behave. This one act play occurs inside a Cuban home where a wake takes place for a woman in her fifties, Pura. Her three sisters, Belén and two others who are not named, are in attendance as are many other women from the neighborhood. They mourn the loss of Pura but they also gossip about the circumstances that led to her death. Shortly after, Don Prudencio, a family friend in his fifties, enters the room to console the women. He is followed by el bobo, who repeatedly enters and exits the stage; he tries to control his laughter, but rarely succeeds. Pepa and the Jovencita, two of the women in attendance, are heard gossiping about the circumstances that surround Pura's death. It is said that she hanged herself because she had fallen in love and been deceived by her lover – and in fact there is actually a note that states such from the deceased. The mourning continues through the night and all of the women doze as Don Prudencio sits among them. They are awakened in the morning by the call that coffee is ready, and, at that point, preparations for the funeral begin.

The actions and words of the characters in this play show us the “mysterious” world of women: the secrets, the gossip, the true desires. Díaz Parrado brings these issues to the forefront

⁴⁹ Sources that discuss these elements of Díaz Parrado's life include *La narrativa femenina cubana 1923-1958*, by Susana A. Montero, *Teatro cubano: relectura cómplice*, by Rosa Ileana Boudet, and *Mujeres en la historia de Cuba* by Antonio J. Molina.

in *El velorio de Pura* while at the same time never once actually explicitly describing Pura's actions. She combines the laughter of the Jovencita, along with the recurring appearances of Manolito, el bobo, to feed into the audience's understanding of Pura's situation and, through that, applies a level of cultural choteo that is demonstrated primarily through the actions of the characters on stage. Just as with the previous works analyzed in this chapter, the choteo in *El velorio* is much more visual than verbal, yet it still contains elements of verbal choteo. This is a characteristic that is unique to the use of choteo in the theater, as it can only be imagined in narrative writings. The question then becomes, can this *visual* choteo still apply to the written text of *El velorio de Pura*? Considering the intentionality of the visual aspects and elements of this play and the stage directions, I would maintain that, yes, visual choteo still remains relevant because I speculate that Díaz Parrado's objective was to stage the work.⁵⁰

While some critics, including González Freire and Boudet, see the success of humor in the Díaz Parrado's writing, others, such as Montes Huidobro, do not, finding her work to be incomprehensible at times (*Detrás del telón* 355). And even if González Freire recognizes the themes of human consciousness and complex psychology in the works of Díaz Parrado, she admits that the playwright's works "se hace más claro y directo cuando enfoca en un asunto cubano," something I suggest is apparent in *El velorio de Pura* (78). The "Cuban issues" represented in this play are norms and customs historically imposed on women in Cuban society and that remained in place in 1941. Díaz Parrado objects to the casual compliance with these norms and customs by Cuban society at large, and she demonstrates her opposition with choteo on multiple occasions throughout the play. Montes Huidobro considers that there are limitations to the works of Díaz Parrado, but he does admit to recognizing innovation and a desire to break

⁵⁰ Based on the way that Boudet discusses *El velorio* in her article "El enigma de la leontina: Flora Díaz Parrado," I am not alone in this assumption.

from the conventional in these works, telling us that her theater is “un teatro que no corresponde a las propuestas nacionalistas previas, donde la cualidad expresiva de lo visual es más importante que el lenguaje oral” (*Detrás del telón* 355-56). Again, while this quality in *El velorio de Pura* plays into the idea that choteo is primarily an oral form of humor, it demonstrates how the humor can also take a visual form. This particular choteo may not be recognized, or in fact seen at all, by each of the characters on the stage, but the audience will recognize it. Interestingly enough, it is Montes Huidobro who uses the actual word choteo in his description of *El velorio de Pura*. His focus is on how “un tema trascendente como la muerte, relacionado con aspectos dolorosos de la vida que incluyen la pérdida de un ser querido, es sometido al ‘choteo’ descaracterizador, tomándose a broma un acontecer que reviste la mayor seriedad” (359). But that of course is what choteo does: it recognizes and examines some of the most serious subject matters and reconstructs them into something humorous. In some instances, this serves simply to call attention to these issues, while in others it could be considered a coping mechanism for dealing with difficult or significant circumstances. In this case, Díaz Parrado creates the impression that she is poking fun at the sobriety of these velorios. She brings the reality of Pura’s life into the solemn scene. She mocks the seriousness of these somber events when the reality of the life of the individual is much darker, or at the very least, outside the social norms of that time.

But again, her mockery manifests itself more through on-stage visuals than through dialogue. Montes Huidobro, critical of Díaz Parrado’s dialogue claims:

La importancia que tiene lo gestual en la obra y el desplazamiento que sufre el diálogo, nos hace pensar en propuestas de reforma escénica que estaba aplicando Flora Díaz Parrado intuitivamente dentro de los términos del choteo caracterizador de lo cubano, ya

que la obra queda despojada de texto significativo en muchos momentos, conservando las indumentarias y mecánica gestual del velorio, todo ello en manos del actor. (361)

Was Montes Huidobro searching for a more verbal choteo in her work? Was he dissatisfied with her incorporation of a visual choteo? This is not completely clear in his critique, but it is apparent that he acknowledges that the visual drives the choteo here and that the actor or the director would need to control this choteo more so than Díaz Parrado as it is in her stage directions, more so than her dialogue, where she incorporates this humor.

Boudet understands the reliance on the visual in this play but argues that the language used in *El velorio de Pura* is also crucial to the work, even if it is slightly unusual and less traditional in nature (*Relectura cómplice* 188). It is striking to look at the differences between Montes Huidobro and both Boudet and González Freire. It appears that the latter two see the humor and style of this play in a way that Montes Huidobro does not. This raises the question: does their ability to acknowledge the humor in *El velorio* have to do with their being women? Does it have to do with a different level of understanding of women's roles in the setting of the velorio? Again, it would be interesting to consider the role of men and women in attendance at the velorios in Cuba as it relates to this play. Montes Huidobro considers the play to have elements of costumbrismo, while simultaneously reflecting an unrealistic character. He explains that "*El velorio de Pura* anticipa dos vertientes de nuestra dramaturgia y nuestra literatura en general. De un lado transcribe la realidad y del otro la distorsiona" (*Detrás del telón* 359). Such a blend of reality and exaggerated or distorted realities is one of the primary characteristics of choteo. It is the twist on what one would consider reality, with what could *potentially* be, that

creates the humorous situations on which choteo thrives. Exploring the written text, this blend becomes apparent, reinforcing the choteo inherent in this work.

While the velorio has been the central theme of many dramatic characterizations, Díaz Parrado takes the subject and makes a parody of it. How then does *El velorio de Pura* work in conjunction with choteo here? Again, my focus will be primarily on the stage directions and not on the spoken words by the characters, but it is important to recognize choteo as something more than just a verbal humor.

As the play commences, the various women in attendance are described. They are dispersed across the stage and throughout the room where the velorio takes place. The exaggerated form of communication between and among these women might be considered choteo: they do not speak in complete sentences, or at the very least, their sentences are short and choppy and there is excessive crying, sighing, and fainting. Of course, many of these actions would be present, and logically so, during a wake in most western cultures, but the excess of this behavior in the initial scene is strikingly comical. Of course, just as in *Y quiso más la vida* and *Junto al río*, the characters themselves do not find humor in the situation, with the possible exceptions of Pepa and the Jovencita later on in the play. The exaggerated emotional opening leads us to believe that this play is not simply a tribute to a lost life but instead a criticism of a particular story or situation – in this case, the expected roles of women at a Cuban velorio.

El bobo, the village fool, is one of the main sources (or perhaps targets) of choteo in this play, appearing and reappearing throughout the play. He says nothing at all each time he comes into view, but he laughs uncontrollably and then quickly retreats. His presence is unsettling, especially as we learn more about the reasons behind Pura's death, or at least the alleged reasons based on assumptions made by Pepa and the Jovencita. The first appearance of el bobo is

indicated by the following stage directions: “*Detrás de Don Prudencio, la figura de un bobo que ríe maliciosamente tratando de contener la risa con sus puños. Balancea su cuerpo al compás extraño de su risa. Cuando Don Prudencio se adelanta, él ríe de nuevo, parece vacilar y hace mutis*” (Díaz Parrado 21). Immediately, it is clear that el bobo knows more than he reveals. His laughter is malicious and strange, according to the stage directions, and his brief hesitation followed by a quick exit should lead the audience to be suspicious of this character. At this point, however, it is not obvious where el bobo’s laughter is directed; is it at Don Prudencio, or is it at the situation as a whole? At the very least, el bobo’s laughter allows the reader to be attentive to Don Prudencio’s actions as the play progresses. El bobo is, in actuality, a fool. This is something easily understood, as his character is billed as “MANOLITO (el bobo).”

Movements and motions are also seen as comic in this somber setting. As Belén and her sisters react to the death of their sister Pura, Belén is seen stretching her hands, and, according to our stage directions, this is supposed to be something that “*resulta cómico*” (22), although no one on stage is laughing at this point – el bobo has temporarily disappeared, and Pepa and the Jovencita are in another room. It is the audience that is supposed to find humor in Belén’s actions – actions that occur immediately after learning of the arrival of Don Prudencio and el bobo. It is not made clear to which of these two individuals she reacts, but we promptly see the ways in which she interacts with Don Prudencio, and this could lead to any number of assumptions about the pair (Are *they* a couple? And if so, is it common knowledge? Is Don Prudencio taking advantage of Belén in her time of need? Is she taking advantage of him?). Or perhaps she has some knowledge about el bobo that the others do not. Whatever the reason, it is evident that Díaz Parrado inserts this action into the play for a particular reason, and as the text states that Belén’s behavior comes across as humorous, it feeds into the choteo throughout the remainder of the

play. Shortly thereafter, Pepa and the Jovencita return to the velorio room. They enter a curious scene in which the three sisters and Don Prudencio are observed sitting together. The stage directions state:

Don Prudencio sienta con cuidado a las dos hermanas. Belén queda en pie, esperando su turno. Después echa de nuevo los brazos a Don Prudencio. En ese momento entran en el cuarto Pepa y las otras mujeres. Pepa bisbisea al oído de la Jovencita, sentada al lado suyo, como si le llamara la atención aquel dolor de Belén en los brazos de Don Prudencio. (23)

This all seems quite solemn and perhaps even typical of the situation, but what follows is the most important element of these stage directions. The younger woman reacts: “*La Jovencita parece que va a reír y se contiene*” (23-24). Obviously, whatever it was that Pepa whispered into her ear had less to do with the pain Belén was feeling and more to do with the sight of her in the arms of Don Prudencio. One would assume that gossip of this nature would be discouraged at solemn gatherings, but Díaz Parrado’s inclusion of this in the play shows that the playwright found importance in revealing the realities of these events, even if some would perceive them as scandalous. Our playwright here is choteando the formal roles that women are *supposed* to take in these velorios by revealing the realities of the gossip inherent in them.⁵¹

In this particular situation, all of the different stage directions demonstrate the visual elements of choteo rather than focus on the oral aspects. This is not to say that there is no verbal choteo in *El velorio de Pura*. To begin with, there are the different adjectives that various

⁵¹ While it may seem strange that gossip would be characteristic of a Cuban wake, Boudet confirms that, “El acompañamiento del difunto es un pretexto para conversar, chismear, comer, y hacer vida social” (“El enigma” 88).

characters use throughout the play to describe Pura. Each comment that these individuals make focuses on her eponymous purity. In reality, concentrating on the virtues of the deceased would be customary behavior for a wake but, in the theater, this praise is often ironic or foreshadows something that will contradict this praise. Some comments directed at the deceased include “¡Qué gran corazón!” “tan buena,” “¡tan recatada!” and “¡tan buena... y honrada!” (27). It is not until the end of the play, however, that the choteo in these comments is revealed to the audience. Just how good or pure was Pura? Arguably, she was good enough to recognize the scandal of her actions in life, but then she did take her own life.⁵²

However, it is Pepa that delivers the majority of the spoken choteo (and on occasion the Jovencita, but usually in conjunction with the words or actions of Pepa). The first instance of this appears slightly before the halfway point of the play, in one of the first lines spoken by Pepa to the crowd at large (as opposed to whispering in the Jovencita’s ear), where she manages to choke out “¡La pobre... Pura... se mató... por apuro... de... amor!” (27) while the Jovencita struggles to curb her laughter. In this moment, Pepa is able to avert the Jovencita’s laughter with just a look, but it is apparent that the two of them have undisclosed information about Pura, something that is perhaps not as pure as her name would imply. It is also notable to remark on the particular word choice made by Díaz Parrado at this point: “apuro.” Most people listening to Pepa speak would tend toward the idea that apuro refers to the hardships that Pura experienced in relation to love, or the lack thereof, but since the word could also be referring to a predicament,

⁵² Even her name is choteo: Pura is intended to speak of her purity, but how pure was she really? And other names also contain traces of choteo as well: Don Prudencio does not seem so prudent in his actions with the sisters, and Belén’s name may immediately bring to mind the nativity, but the word has alternate meanings which include madhouse, bedlam, and mess. Of course, she was a ‘mess’ over her sister’s death, but there is a sense of irony in that she is the one whose name could mean “mess” while her “pure” sister will be remembered for her indiscretions and lack of purity in the moments before her death.

embarrassment, or trouble, it is quite reasonable to presume that one of these three possible definitions is the “apuro” that Pepa refers to. At the very least, the Jovencita creates this impression with her reaction.

Later, when Don Prudencio asks why Pura would have hanged herself, the answer he is given is that it was for love, or because of the deception of love. It is the Jovencita who discloses this information, and what is notable here is the humor she finds in emphasizing Pura’s age, 50 years, at the time of her death (and of course also at the time of her potential “indiscretions”). Here the third sister questions who Pura could have been in love with:

Belén. (*Cambiando los gestos de un lado para el otro, tratando de recordar.*) Eso mismo... eso mismo... pregunto yo... ¡ay, Dios!

Pepa. Y de pregunta... en pregunta... llegaremos a la conclusión. (*Termina la frase en voz baja, dirigiéndose a la Jovencita.*)

La Jovencita. (*Al escuchar la terminación de la frase.*) ¡Ja!.. ¡Ja!.. ¡Ja! (30)

Again, Pepa alludes to knowing more about Pura than the sisters do, or, at the very least, that she is willing to admit her awareness of Pura’s actions. Perhaps the sisters are cognizant of Pura’s indiscretions, perhaps they are not, or perhaps they assume certain things but are not willing to allow themselves to come to the conclusion that this so-called love of their sister’s was the town fool, Manolito.

Yet, for as much as Pepa insinuates about Pura, she clearly wishes to learn more. At one point, when Belén shares with everyone a story about her sister, La Beata cries out, “¡Un rosario por su alma!” Pepa responds, “Después... cuando Belén termine su relato” (35). Here we have

choteo against the religious purity of certain women in the room, Pura, and even more so, Pepa. Pepa demonstrates that she is more interested in obtaining further gossip about Pura's situation than she is about praying for her soul. No one reprimands her for this comment, and in fact, the third sister goes on to request that Belén continue her story. Here Díaz Parrado's choteo speaks out against the solemnity of the velorios. She is conceivably criticizing the lack of etiquette in these events, but perhaps, and I believe this is more likely, she is commenting on the social expectations of the solemnity of these events and acknowledging the reality of gossip and humor in Cuban velorios.

Throughout the play, Manolito, el bobo, continues to enter and exit the scene. He appears nine times throughout the play, briefly emerging on stage, laughing, and then disappearing again. This repeated action by el bobo is bound to elicit laughter from the audience, or, at the very least, this would appear to be the goal. While this repetition may come across as unsettling, the humor in the unknown (why does he keep returning?) makes this a perfect example of choteo in the play. His entering and exiting the scene repeatedly, resembles the build-up to a great punch line, a sort of drawn-out choteo over the course of the entire play. And what is this punch line? El bobo himself is in fact the so-called love that brought Pura to kill herself.

Afterward, Pepa and Don Prudencio leave the room to get some coffee for the sisters. The stage directions for the moments leading up to their reappearance in the room, as well as those immediately following their return, reveal much about the social expectations of this time for the sisters. Díaz Parrado states here that "*Las hermanas se sientan de naturales. Pepa regresa trayendo en una mano una taza de café... Don Prudencio la sigue con dos tazas de café. Las hermanas recobran su postura artificial*" (42). What exactly is happening here? Díaz Parrado reveals how these women behave without the gender-based constraints of the velorio customs.

When they are alone, all of the sisters behave naturally, comfortably, and at ease. But as soon as Don Prudencio reenters the room, they immediately revert to the formal behavior they maintained before he left. This is yet another example of choteo on the part of Díaz Parrado. Here she exaggerates the difference between cultural expectations and reality. As Boudet explains in the introduction to the 2001 edition of the play, “con una desfachatez y una insolencia muy particulares, Díaz Parrado condensa en ese velorio su visión desgarrada, grotesca y cruda de la hipocresía social” (IX). It is such hypocrisy that Díaz Parrado denounces, and the particular choice of gestures for her characters not only highlights this hypocrisy, but also demonstrates its utter ridiculousness through choteo.

Boudet’s recognition that Díaz Parrado’s interpretation of a Cuban velorio is a critique of social hypocrisy only reinforces the argument that the plays of the late 1930s and early 1940s that incorporate choteo do so in order to critique the social issues in Cuban society at that time. But again, I would take it one step further and contend that it is not simply a critique but a critique via choteo. Choteo is not necessarily knowingly experienced by and between the characters on the stage (or the page in this case), but it is without a doubt intended to be experienced as choteo by the audience or reader. A clear example of this occurs when the women and Don Prudencio are discussing funeral arrangements for Pura. Belén wishes for everything to be white. Here, Pepa questions cultural customs: “La blancura es signo de castidad. (*A la mujer que tiene al lado.*) ¿No cree usted... que es un poco ridícula... esta costumbre?” The woman next to her responds that “las costumbres... son las costumbres... y no se pueden cambiar” (Díaz Parrado 44). Here Díaz Parrado manipulates her characters to convey her position against the societal expectations for women in Cuba while simultaneously choteando with her audience about said expectations and roles of women at this time. Given this approach to her piece, it is

little wonder that this play was not staged during this time.⁵³ Writing these behaviors into her story was one thing, but staging the production for many other women to see and enjoy, and perhaps even cause questioning of the roles that they, as women, were supposed to play within their society, was entirely another matter.

And when Díaz Parrado challenges the roles that women are expected to uphold during these *velorios*, she simultaneously brings into question the behaviors of the men at those events. First, there are very few men in attendance; and second, their behavior in no way resembles the solemnity of the women, who are expected to continue their mourning while the men are permitted to move forward. Díaz Parrado alludes to this contrast in behaviors more than once throughout the play. In one occurrence, the script describes an action that takes place outside of the mourning room. There are loud and boisterous noises coming from the other side of the door, with one of the men shouting to Don Prudencio asking if he would like a shot of rum (41-42). Another example where Díaz Parrado emphasizes the differences in behavior between men and women revolves around the arrival of the mayor who has come to pay his respects. From his choice of words as he addresses various individuals, to his joining a group of men across the room, it is apparent that he is not expected to remain solemn, so long as he has done his duty by addressing the surviving sisters:

⁵³ It is important to note that Díaz Parrado lived in France when she wrote *El velorio de Pura*. While I have done my best to choose playwrights who lived in Cuba at the time they wrote these particular plays, I have made an exception in the case of Díaz Parrado because she was not living in exile but rather fulfilling diplomatic service in France. This removed perspective she has would likely have affected the playwright's ability to freely incorporate *choteo* in her work. Just as I have found no record of a production in Cuba in the 1940s, I have been unable to discover evidence of any performance in France. I contend that *El velorio* was intended for Cuban audiences not only due to the language but also due to the moments of *choteo*.

Alcalde. ¿Qué hay, Padre Manuel? (*Da la mano a Don Prudencio.*) ¿Qué hay, chico? (*Después se dirige a Belén.*) Le acompaño su sentimiento. (*Da la mano a la Hermana Segunda.*) Le acompaño su sentimiento. (*Y por último, a la Hermana Tercera, dándole la mano y el consabido.*) Le acompaño su sentimiento. (*Las mujeres hacen movimientos con las cabezas. El Alcalde se dirige hacia el grupo de hombres que están situados o apiñados en la puerta del cuarto-comedor. Allí da la mano con grades sacudidas y sobre todo, se abrazan. Belén y sus hermanas han geremiqueado todo ese tiempo.*). (49)

The stage directions first present the Alcalde's social protocols for interacting with family members of the deceased, especially with the women. They then describe the stark difference in his interactions with the men in attendance. Here there is a casual and relaxed behavior that would perhaps be standard for day-to-day interactions among men rather than those that reflect the mourning process that is so clearly required to be maintained by women. Conceivably, these men are choteando among themselves. This of course cannot be determined since Díaz Parrado does not indicate any specifics of their conversations, but rather leaves them on the periphery. Women are her primary focus in this play, and choteando with the audience is something she elects to do via the words and actions of the women over those of the men.

After careful analysis of the work, it is evident that *El velorio de Pura* contains an abundance of choteo, more so than the other two plays in this chapter. It is the last written of the three works, which may have influenced the degree to which Díaz Parrado used choteo, or it may have to do with the playwright being a woman and directly relating to the issues she addressed with her choteo, or it could have to do with the subject matter itself. It is also the only play discussed from this period written after the establishment of the 1940 Cuban constitution, widely

considered to be quite progressive for the time.⁵⁴ While the other two plays are critical of social expectations of the time, it is perhaps Díaz Parrado's piece that critiques the broadest categories of people. Cid Pérez criticizes those in the medical professions, and Baralt condemns the so-called revolutionaries more concerned about their own rise to power, but Díaz Parrado criticizes men in general and society at large for upholding certain expectations that could be perceived as archaic. I am not the only one to see the choteo in *El velorio*. Even though Montes Huidobro and Boudet do not necessarily agree on the success of her treatment of choteo, both critics recognize her application of the Cuban humor and its overall impact on the piece.⁵⁵ In general Montes Huidobro appears to be more critical of this play, and it is unclear if this is simply due to the dialogue style that Díaz Parrado implements, or if it is for other reasons.

Conclusion: Choteo and Change Post-Machado

When assessing the three plays together, it is evident that the choteo contained within these texts relies heavily on the cultural understanding of the audience or reader. While there is little to no choteo among the characters within these three plays, it seems apparent that each playwright is choteando with his or her audience. Perhaps attempts at choteo from one character to another would be too explicit at this time, especially considering the recent emergence of choteo as something other than targeting black Cubans and Galicians.⁵⁶ *Y quiso más la vida, Junto al río*, and *El velorio de Pura* are among the first plays of their kind. Subversive and anti-hierarchical choteo had of course existed prior to these plays, but it was used more by black Cubans to

⁵⁴ The 1940 constitution provided for any social reforms including equal rights, land reform, public education, and minimum wage, among other things.

⁵⁵ Montes Huidobro mentions this Chapter II of the second part of *El teatro cubano durante la República: Cuba detrás del telón*; Boudet covers the idea in Chapter 12 of *Teatro cubano: relectura cómplice*.

⁵⁶ This transition in the uses of choteo is fully detailed in the introduction to this study.

reappropriate a humor that had targeted them for many years. These three playwrights were white Cubans who ventured into the use of subversive choteo in performance and literature. They did not target the historically “typical” objects of choteo. By speaking out against complacency toward accepting societal norms and targeting those who had previously considered themselves immune to these forms of judgment (doctors, revolutionary leaders, and men in general), they asked their audiences (readers) to challenge the established authority of these figures and not allow these same individuals to continue conducting their lives in ways that were harmful to others. In the early years after the removal of the Machado government, their desire for social change seems evident. A straightforward approach to discussing these issues, however, would not have the same impact on audiences as might the inclusion of humor into their critiques.

When considering McGraw’s benign violation theory,⁵⁷ it is important to focus on how the audience may receive the choteo. McGraw reminds us that the individual making the jokes must know his or her audience by keeping in mind what they would consider benign and what they would consider a violation in order to understand better what they would find humorous (McGraw 15). When I examine this idea of audience reception in regards to choteo, I find that although McGraw’s conclusion seems somewhat obvious, it is important. Whether in the theater or in day-to-day interactions, one must understand his or her audience. Humor is not understood or appreciated equally by everyone. Though it is unclear exactly how audiences of this time (would have) reacted to these plays, McGraw’s theory speaks to the idea that some audiences and/or critics may not have found the plays as humorous as I assume they were intended to be.

⁵⁷ McGraw explains that “humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign)” (McGraw 10). Further details regarding this theory can be found in the introductory chapter.

Those in the medical field may not have found the play by Cid Pérez to be funny at all. In fact, they may have been insulted at the insinuations made by the playwright throughout the work. Former revolutionaries who were then in power may not have understood or appreciated the choteo in Baralt's play. And in some cases, notably those of Baralt and Díaz Parrado, the inability to find the humor in the work could even play a part in the piece not being staged for many years. In each of these cases it is possible that the violation outweighed the benign in a way that might have removed the humor for these particular audience members or readers. While many would have seen the humor, they would not have been the victims of the choteo. Without having been in attendance for these productions, we cannot know if this is true or not, but McGraw's theory suggests that the victims of this choteo would not appreciate the humor found in these situations. Even though I argue that the playwrights attempted to make the audience one of their objects of ridicule, spectators would not have been so directly the targets that they could not find the humor in the situation. Choteo must balance this in a particular way. It must focus on the issues in a way that the audience still understands the comedic elements of the pieces. Since the audience exists in a state of resignation and acceptance of their situations, they do not find themselves to be the direct target of the choteo. In that sense they are still able to see the humor in the words and actions of the characters on stage.

The question then becomes one of effectiveness. How effective is the play at evoking change if the audience does not find itself to be the target? Their resignation could be a barrier for truly criticizing the situation themselves. The playwrights are critical in each of these three plays, but does the audience embrace this criticism and make it its own? Perhaps yes and perhaps no, although certainly at this time in history it was not enough to make substantial changes to the issues for which the playwrights advocated. Corruption continued to exist on many levels and the

roles and expectations for women changed very little during this time. Reflection on a lack of change often leads to frustration, in particular a frustration that one has little impact on making change within society. Cid Pérez expressed his frustration with the medical field in Cuba, with the privilege experienced by those of higher social classes, and with the role of nepotism in Cuba; Baralt expressed his frustration with social classes as well, but also with revolutionaries who only aspired to better themselves and not the country as a whole; and Díaz Parrado expressed her frustration with the roles that women were expected to maintain within Cuban culture.

In each of these cases there are elements of frustration as well as a partial resignation to one's situation. However, I would argue, the playwrights themselves also spoke out against this resignation through their use of choteo. They intended to evoke laughter from the audience, of course, but there was simultaneously a desire to move toward change. Bergson claims that "society asks for something more; it is not satisfied with simply living, it insists on living well. What it now has to dread is that each one of us, content with paying attention to what affects the essentials of life, will, so far as the rest is concerned, give way to the easy automatism of acquired habits" (19). I maintain that it is not necessarily "society" in these cases that is asking for something more, but more specifically, the playwrights who are asking society for something more. They simultaneously reject the resignation seen in society and acknowledge their role in the acceptance of this resignation. They do not necessarily exclude themselves from this resignation, but they are at least able to separate themselves from it enough to challenge the rest of society to be aware of the changes that need to be made.

As Bergson explains, "Laughter is, above all, a corrective" (197). In the case of Cuba and choteo, it is intended to fix the audience, to correct their resigned behavior and to call attention to

the inaction that exists in the country. This laughter, Bergson says, “must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed” (197). The humor in these works may cause the audience members or readers to laugh, but it should also make them reflect upon their role in the situation. While the immediate target of choteo would be considered the authority figures (i.e., the political), it is also, as previously mentioned, the spectators or readers (i.e., the social). In the latter’s case, their complacency is the target of choteo. The playwrights reflect (and also affect) the position of society at large, but they take the leading role here by acknowledging the liberties taken with society. The playwrights concurrently serve as the point of origin of the laughter and the target of this laughter. They are in no way sympathetic to the authority figures or society at large. They play both sides of the coin by making their audiences laugh and turning them into the target of the laughter.

Although these particular plays may have escaped direct censorship, they were not completely immune to potential censorship. As Escarpanter Fernández reports, “Sólo un reducidísimo número de estas piezas están publicadas, ya por cuenta y riesgo del autor, ya seccionadas en alguna revista literaria. La mayor parte permanece en el manuscrito. En muchas ocasiones ni el propio autor conserva los originales de sus obras” (152). This speaks to the idea that censorship was still largely influential during the post-Machado era. It recognizes that, when censored, the content of plays was something that was not approved of by the government. There is no evidence that any of these three plays in particular was necessarily censored, but in the cases of *Y quiso más la vida* and *El velorio de Pura*, neither was staged for many years, and no written record seems to remain with respect to the one known production of *El velorio*. The lack of stage production of these works may or may not have been an official form of censorship, but

it seemingly reflects, at the very least, a potential desire to oppress their writings and, especially, to suppress the topics that they called into question.

As Hidalgo acknowledges, “La conciencia nacional es relativa a todas las clases sociales, es un sentimiento común a todo el pueblo y no es exclusiva de la clase dominante” (*Irreverencia y humor* 34). Throughout the emergence of this new form of choteo during the post-Machado years, we see that this statement is quite true. There is, in each of these plays, a national consciousness that is demonstrated through the various characters. There are calls for change directed at those in power, be it in the government or in the medical field, and there are calls for change geared toward gender expectations within society. These changes were a concern for all Cubans of the time whether they were in favor of the inevitable developments or not. Choteo is a part of the national consciousness in Cuba, which is one of the reasons why it was utilized as a tool to critique the status quo at this moment in Cuban history. People viewing (or reading) these plays would understand the humor being used and would understand the calls to social change. Whether or not they would actively work to implement change is another matter. Bergson suggests that “[comedy] begins, in fact with what might be called *a growing callousness to social life*” (134).⁵⁸ If there is such callousness, then why do these playwrights insist on focusing on the social issues at hand? How can there be disgust and callousness at the same time? I argue that the scripts studied here reflect two levels of disgust: one, disgust for the social situations they critique, and the other, a disgust for the callousness of society. I argue that a callousness from the playwrights would not be possible, not at least in the way in which Bergson describes it. He states that the comic individual (in this case the playwright, either through the characters or the stage directions) does not bother getting in touch with other people, but this is not true for

⁵⁸ Emphasis in the original.

choteo. Choteo can be a humor that very much understands and relates the experiences of other people so that they can connect with the humor; however, perhaps that is an element specific to choteo in the theater rather than of choteo in general. Choteo at a social level, at least, must show something that the audience can relate to, something they associate with. The choteador in these instances must have an understanding of society and of the individuals within that society.

In the 1930s and early 1940s, choteo had only recently been intellectually recognized as a cultural phenomenon. It had only been a decade or so since Mañach gave his speech in which he criticized the use of this particular humor and worried about its role in the potential downfall of Cuban society. This opinion had an impact on whether or not writers chose to embrace the use of choteo in their works, or if, at the very least, they openly acknowledged their use of this humor. For many writers, if choteo was seen as something to be disdained, it may not have been good for publishing or producing their works. Of the three plays studied here, the play that most overtly used choteo, *El velorio de Pura*, was the one that was staged the least. The other two works were much subtler in their incorporation of choteo into their works, speaking directly to the audience rather than using their characters to express humor. Mañach's opinions on the subject may have evolved over the course of his life and career, but these early observations on the subject would have influenced the writers of the time and in the years following his 1928 speech.

The intellectually artistic choteo that emerges during this period in history goes beyond resignation to include tones of resistance. It is this resistance that differentiates cultural choteo from the day-to-day choteo found throughout Cuba. Cid Pérez, Baralt, and Díaz Parrado all demonstrate elements of resistance in their choteo along with their anti-authority stances. While these three playwrights address different concerns and use their intellectual choteo to bring

awareness to specific issues, each of these topics was crucial to Cuban society at that time. These were subjects with which many Cubans were familiar, and criticizing them with humor only offered the opportunity to move them closer to the forefront of social discussions. These themes also brought with them criticism of the plays themselves, but this was a risk it seems the playwrights were willing to take in order to address the topics that interested and concerned them the most. The concerns were addressed, and some changes perhaps were made, but were they sufficient? Was choteo enough to change the situation in these three instances? In the case of privilege of those in the medical field and upper middle class, changes were likely gradual and took place over numerous years. The issues relating to the revolutionary passivity were of course addressed with the arrival of the next revolution, but this too was not for many years, and, it could be argued that little total change was actually made. The issues related to women in Cuba have certainly changed over time, even if some of these customs are still in place. Choteo may not have been completely successful in making changes at the time, but it did, at least in the 1930s and early 1940s, plant the seed that would bring about change as the twentieth century continued. Choteo in the early post-Machado years began to speak out against the dominant order of things; “El humor y el choteo han permitido expresar su inconformidad a aquellos quienes no han estado dispuestos a subordinar su inteligencia al orden dominante” (Hidalgo, *Irreverencia y humor* 214). These playwrights, and other writers and artists of the time, took the first steps toward what was to become a new way (or at least an old way that had developed into something new) of speaking out against authority figures. This approach would continue throughout the Batista years and even, as we will see, into later decades. The reasons for the inclusion of choteo in future works would change according to the different situations in which

Cubans would find themselves, but the groundwork for this twentieth-century version of the humor would be, by then, well laid.

Chapter 2: Is There Escape from the Cycle? Political Choteo and Castro's Revolution

The Cuban sense of humor has needled authority from colonial to communist rule. It never was and never will be crushed by totalitarian repression. It remains the exception to absolute power, the fly in Castro's ointment. (Aguilar i).⁵⁹

With Fidel Castro's arrival in La Habana in 1959 came many changes. Writers and artists living in forced or self-imposed exile under Batista felt able to return to Cuba. Hope and expectation of things to come are reflected in many of the early writings from the revolutionary period. New writers emerged and authors had the sense that they could take on previously taboo political subjects. As Rine Leal states in his 1963 article, "El nuevo rostro del teatro cubano," published in *La Gaceta de Cuba*, "...eso era lo que todos esperábamos, voces nuevas en la escena, una manera renovada de expresar lo cubano, una dramaturgia que sin romper los necesarios nexos con lo mejor del pasado, nos diera una continuación lógica del proceso creativo" (10). And this is exactly the type of theater that was written in Cuba during the early days of the Revolution. This new theater continued to uphold elements of the earlier, Spanish-influenced theater while providing alternate means of expressing what it meant to be Cuban. Choteo maintained its presence as a traditional element used in new ways to express contemporary issues. However, after Castro's famous 1961 speech, "Palabras a los intelectuales," the number of censored works increased drastically. Many award-winning plays written during the 1960s were quickly censored

⁵⁹ I recognize that Aguilar holds very strong anti-Castro opinions, and while I do not necessarily agree or disagree with his perspectives, I found that the way in which this quote relates the use of choteo to the response to the humor by Revolutionary leader was fitting for this chapter.

and shut down.⁶⁰ Many of those who had hoped to return to an island that would reflect who they were and allow them to write what they wished were sorely disappointed.

Early on in the Revolution the newly established political system exerted an impact and influence on the writing in Cuba. Prior excitement for what could have been was soon extinguished. As Matías Montes Huidobro writes in *El teatro cubano en el vórtice del compromiso 1959-1961*, “lo que en 1959 empezó con una actitud entusiasta y esperanzadora, para mediados del 1961 ya estaba marcado con la desilusión y el desencanto” (11). This disenchantment did not necessarily prevent playwrights of this period, and especially those analyzed in this chapter, from writing, even if it did occasionally impact the staging of their works. The writings that emerged during the early years of the Revolution reinforce my argument that the turmoil in the country was perhaps one of the most important elements to influence theater-writing in the early 1960s. In some cases, the pain and suffering that many playwrights experienced in life was reflected in their works; in other cases, playwrights’ works moved closer toward satisfying the ideological requirements of the new regime. Despite these differences, each of the plays studied here uses humor to question the cyclical nature of politics and political leaders.

Theater of the absurd, an influential tendency in much Latin American theater at that time, was also frequently an element in Cuban plays.⁶¹ The absurd seems to complement the

⁶⁰ Works that expressed a less than agreeable opinion of these changes were often condemned. Many of these plays were not only well written, they were also award winning. But due to the interpretations of their political positions, they were also then censored, condemned, or, at the very least, never staged. Some examples include *Dos viejos pánicos* by Virgilio Piñera, *La noche de los asesinos* by José Triana, and *Las siete contra tebas* by Antón Arrufat.

⁶¹ See, for example, *Violent Acts: A Study of Contemporary Latin American Theatre*, by Severino Joao Medeiros Albuquerque, “Evolutionary Tendencies in Spanish-American Absurd Theatre” by Tamara Holzapfel, and “The Theatre of the Absurd in Cuba after 1959” by Terry Palls. According to Palls, “the influence of the Theatre of the Absurd in Spanish America can be noted as early as 1949, the year in which a Cuban playwright, Virgilio Piñera, published his absurd play, *Falsa alarma* [False Alarm]. Throughout the fifties examples of absurd plays appear in Argentina, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Cuba. Although there were several absurd plays written in Cuba before 1959, a greater number surface after this date” (68).

concept of choteo, especially considering the characteristics of the former as compared with those involved with the use of the latter. In *El teatro del absurdo en Cuba (1948-1968)*, Ricardo Lobato Morchón makes mention of the use of choteo in some Cuban works of theater of the absurd. In many ways, the absurd connected with the sociopolitical reality in Cuba at the time, and the connection between reality and humor was crucial to the use of choteo in the theater. Morchón also discusses a sharp decrease in theater of the absurd after 1968 in Cuba. This decline was also apparent in theater that utilized choteo as a means of expression, especially as the theater became almost wholly state-controlled. Censorship, either explicit or implicit, took a strong hold at this time, and neither the absurd nor choteo were conducive to propagandistic theater.⁶²

Although Morchón does not situate the disappearance of theater of the absurd until 1968, it was much earlier that many playwrights became disillusioned with the possibilities for their own writing and production. In the beginning, there were attempts at working together with the state to bring theater to the masses,⁶³ but when major changes occurred in 1961, it was apparent that the imagined cooperative relationship would not work for everyone. As Montes Huidobro explains, “Pero para fines de 1961, esa cohesión inicial que representaba una visión pluralista, queda anulada, ya que la dogmatización de la esfera oficial representaba la gradual eliminación del esfuerzo privado de naturaleza individual” (*El vórtice* 14-15). Whether or not they incorporated choteo, plays written in the initial years of the Revolution reflect a variety of attitudes toward the changes that were occurring in Cuba, both positive and negative.

⁶² See introduction for further information on explicit and implicit censorship.

⁶³ During the 1960s and 1970s there was an increase in the number of theater collectives in Cuba. These groups often traveled around the country to communicate with large groups of people regarding the changes being made by the revolutionary government. (Banham 162)

It is important to remember that choteo is often used as a cultural response to suffering within Cuban culture. It involves the idea that laughter is required to help escape one's problems or situation. Some choteo is simply directed at an individual whereas other uses of choteo direct the humor toward circumstances related to suffering.

The three plays that I have chosen for this chapter are *El flaco y el gordo* by Virgilio Piñera, *La paz en el sombrero* by Gloria Parrado, and *La muerte del Ñeque* by José Triana. All were written during the Revolution's first five years, between 1959 and 1963. Each play questions authority in one way or another by speaking to the period's political concerns. While Parrado's text may purport a focus on foreign capitalist leaders, I argue that all three plays use choteo to critique Cuba and Cuban authorities. As Gonzales Freire mentions, "Es ésta una generación eminentemente política, que no se oculta que el drama cubano está íntimamente ligado a los vaivenes políticos, económicos y sociales del país y por esos causes [sic] trata de agarrarlo" (*Teatro Cubano 1927-1961* 132). And though all three playwrights wrote prior to this period, the texts included in this chapter consider the shifting political viewpoints even more so than previously.

What is imperative, however, is to consider those who chose to incorporate choteo in their writing and why they did so. As I suggested in chapter one, the use of choteo returns to the idea of challenging power through humor. Choteo often serves to reveal political tensions and to oppose the discourse of power within Cuba. Piñera, Parrado, and Triana expressed their defiance to differing degrees, but each of these plays possesses an element of opposition. The mockery of the Cuban political system varies among the plays, and an argument could be made as to *which* powers of authority are being ridiculed, but in each case the target of the choteo within the play is either a real or symbolic political figure.

Whereas the three playwrights whose works are discussed in this chapter were likely writing in response to a reassessment of Cuban national identity in the 1960s, the inclusion of choteo as a critical tool to focus on these changes caused conflict with Cuban leadership and in certain cases prohibited or prevented the staging of these works. Considering Piñera, Parrado, and Triana's works through the forms of choteo they employed during the first five years of the Revolution facilitates comprehension of the reactions of the Cuban government in each of these works.

El flaco y el gordo: Choteo, Food, and Revolution

Virgilio Piñera (1912-1979) wrote *El flaco y el gordo* in 1959, a few months after Castro's victory in Havana. At that particular moment, many people were optimistic about the new regime and did not openly question it. Piñera had hopes as well. According to Thomas Anderson, "Piñera's initial response to his country's newfound sense of nationhood was at once enthusiastic and cautious" ("Disillusion to Revolution" 87). The social environment in which Piñera came of age, together with his personal history, helped create a sort of anti-hierarchical spirit in the author, and it also engendered the use of choteo in his writing.

Piñera was born and died in Cuba. He lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, from 1946 to 1958, afterwards returning to Cuba, where he remained until his death. Piñera was known not only as a playwright, but also a novelist and a poet. He co-founded the journals *Orígenes* (with José Lezama Lima) and *Ciclón* (with José Rodríguez Feo) and served as a collaborator for *Revolución* and its supplemental publication, *Lunes de Revolución*. In the last years of his life he was publicly ostracized both for his ideological differences and his homosexuality (Molinero 19). Based on his experiences in exile and knowledge of Cuban history, Piñera was quite hesitant

in regards to the new government, and feared that earlier political problems such as those seen under Machado and Batista might return. Though he was skeptical, it is imperative to note that his perspectives and the choteo in his writing were not due to any particular counterrevolutionary desire. His hesitation, however, was interpreted as counterrevolutionary by authorities, and although the play was staged, the production was short-lived. *El flaco y el gordo* opened at the Lyceum Theater on Friday, September 4, 1959, and was performed a total of six times (González *Cronología del teatro*).⁶⁴ It would not be staged again for many years.⁶⁵

When he wrote, Piñera attempted to show tragedy and comedy simultaneously. According to Frank Dauster in his article “Cuban Drama Today,” “[Piñera’s] influence is due to his affinity with the theater of the absurd, his willingness to shock, and his insistence on startling the audience in the process of criticizing social conditions” (158). Choteo was the perfect tool for achieving this reaction. For Piñera, choteo served as an evasive method and a way to defend himself against critics. In “Piñera teatral,” the first-person introduction to the playwright’s *Teatro completo*, he writes, “Soy el que hace más seria la seriedad a través del humor, del absurdo y de lo grotesco” (9). In *El flaco y el gordo*, the serious situation is hunger and access to food, and the humor (or, more specifically, the choteo) that Piñera uses comes from *el gordo* and is directed at *el flaco*. It is easy to categorize many of Piñera’s plays as absurdist, and *El flaco y el gordo* is no exception, but I argue that this play is more than simply absurd. Piñera’s absurdist writings, as

⁶⁴ Compared with other plays that were staged in 1959, *El flaco y el gordo* had far fewer performances than many. Plays such as *Días felices* by Claude-André Puget and *Cuando ella es la otra* by Víctor Ruiz Iriarte were performed eighteen and twenty-one times, respectively. These works were also later restaged. Even a notably counterrevolutionary play such as *El hombre inmaculado* by Ramón Ferreira was performed fourteen times that year. Of the sixteen plays that were staged in September of 1959, the average number of performances was fourteen. As such, *El flaco y el gordo* falls well below that average (González).

⁶⁵ According to Luis F. González-Cruz, “Si hiciéramos un viaje retrospectivo encontraríamos que ya en agosto de 1959 –el día 18, para ser exactos– había tenido Virgilio su primer problema cuando Mirta Aguirre, crítico teatral del diario comunista *Hoy*, había censurado su obra *El flaco y el gordo* por su ambiguo y ‘negativo’ mensaje político” (10).

Dauster continues, “have a grotesque quality, due largely to his personal vision of the Cuban sense of humor, which he believes to be a form of escape from an unacceptable reality” (158). This is choteo – that particularly Cuban sense of humor that doubles as escapism from the troubling realities – that Piñera himself, and Cubans in general, experience. However, Dauster also argues that “Piñera openly regards the theater as a pulpit from which to preach his social message. When this content is subordinated to the drama, the works are frequently of considerable interest” (159). This is where I allege that Dauster may be mistaken. It is, in fact, when Piñera’s theater focuses on the social message that it is at its most interesting. It is the social message in *El flaco y el gordo* that makes it a stronger and more important work than has previously been considered.

Analyses of the messages in *El flaco y el gordo* are many. Natividad González Freire, for one, suggests that rather than being symbolically revolutionary, *El flaco y el gordo* had the opposite effect, producing negative reactions (*Teatro cubano (1927-1961)* 162). Rine Leal, on the other hand, claims that “‘El flaco y el gordo’ es la pieza más alucinante que se ha estrenado en La Habana en todo este año” (*En primera persona* 114).⁶⁶ These varied interpretations may stem from the ways in which the choteo has (or has not) been understood in this play. Piñera does not discuss *El flaco y el gordo* in the introduction to his 1960 *Teatro completo*, perhaps because of such mixed interpretations. The play had been staged the year before, under the direction of Julio Matas, at the *Sala de Lyceum* and not again in or after 1960 due to its

⁶⁶ The analyses of Dauster, González Freire, and Leal cited here were all written in the 1960s. While Dauster was living in the United States, the other two wrote from inside Cuba.

controversial nature.⁶⁷ As a result, Piñera may have resisted writing more about it so as to avoid any further counterrevolutionary accusations about the work.

El flaco y el gordo by Virgilio Piñera is a play in which food, or the lack of food, plays a crucial role in narrating Cuban political issues of the late 1950s. The story takes place in a hospital room where two men, el flaco and el gordo, are recovering from their injuries. El flaco has a broken leg and el gordo has a broken arm. Piñera never explicitly states why el gordo has a broken arm, but it is soon explained that el flaco broke his leg while trying to escape after stealing some food. In the first scene of this one-act play, el flaco laments his situation and how, even after being in the hospital, he has not been able to rid himself of his long-standing hunger. El gordo does not understand the problems that el flaco suffers and openly mocks him for his complaints. The orderly brings dinner and el gordo is given everything he asks for since he is able to pay for his care. El flaco, on the other hand, receives only the bare minimum of nourishment, as he is also a poor man. He is at the mercy of el gordo in order to procure any additional food and, as we will see, is rarely successful. Throughout the first act, el gordo takes full advantage of his economic situation and holds this power over el flaco. He uses choteo to reduce and humiliate el flaco. Though el gordo offers some of his food to el flaco, it is only on the condition that the other man work for it. While he does follow through on his promise to feed el flaco once, he denies his roommate any further bites. At the end of the first scene, just before the curtain falls, it is clear that el flaco has reached his breaking point. When the curtain rises on the second scene, el flaco is alone and surrounded by human bones. He has become the new fat man and relishes his new position momentarily as can be seen through his attempts at humor. At

⁶⁷ The next production date I have for *El flaco y el gordo* in Cuba is in 1991, when it was performed at *Guiñón Nacional* in Havana and featured Roberto Gacio as el gordo. This information was obtained from Gacio himself in a personal conversation on September 15, 2016.

the end of the play, a new skinny man enters the room and the new fat man (formerly el flaco) breaks down sobbing because he realizes that although he is now in the position of power, his newfound authority as el gordo is precarious at best.⁶⁸

Thomas F. Anderson suggests that *El flaco y el gordo* play is “above all, a fierce criticism of the social problem of hunger in pre-revolutionary Cuba” (“Hunger and Revolution” 24). El gordo represents the wealthy Cuban classes in power at the time and el flaco portrays those living in poverty. Fidel Castro’s government in the 1960s understood this criticism of Batista’s government, as demonstrated in the first act, but questioned the cyclical nature of power as presented in the play. This interpretation stems from the transition between acts and particular actions of el flaco in the second half of the play. I take a third position and contend that, on top of the criticism of Batista, *El flaco y el gordo* served more as a *warning* for the new regime than a direct critique. This warning cautions Cubans and the new Cuban government not to allow the historical power struggle to continue as it had under Batista, Machado, and others before them.

Throughout the first act of the play, the power that el gordo has over el flaco, especially as it relates to food, is quite evident. Food is power and those that have money have food, and, as such, hold control. This is reflective of the Cuban situation under Batista. It is clear from Piñera’s writing that he does not support this prevailing power dynamic. By the end of the first scene, el flaco is driven to the point where he no longer tolerates the subordinate position in which he has been trapped. When the curtain falls between scenes, in a moment symbolic of the Cuban Revolution as led by Fidel Castro, *el flaco eats el gordo*. This unseen action shows how el flaco’s relationship with food is reflective of the larger social structure of Cuban society. When

⁶⁸ The use of the word “new” in this paragraph in no way alludes to Ernesto Guevara’s “hombre nuevo” as his essay on the subject was not published until 1965. However, it is interesting to consider the connections between the play and the essay and what it says about mankind’s ability to change.

el flaco (now el gordo) encounters a *new* flaco, he must figure out how to retain his newfound power as el gordo and not be eaten or replaced by the newly arrived flaco. This turning of the political tables, rather than serving as a direct criticism of the new government, constitutes a precursor for the warning presented towards the end of scene two. This scene indicates the cyclical nature of power, at least as it has existed up to this point in Cuba. While it is possible to read this as a caution for Castro that the same thing could happen to him in the future, I propose that it speaks more to the idea that Castro and the revolutionary government must take the proper precautions to not fall into the same traps as their predecessors. Just as el flaco has become aware of the precarity of his position, so too must the new leaders in order to not repeat the mistakes of the past.

The play uses the tragedy of hunger and the relationship between the two characters, together with choteo, to provoke laughter as well as, perhaps, instill concern within the viewer. Choteo opposes the discourse of power through humor and criticizes the system. In a grotesque way, el gordo's behavior toward el flaco is humorous. Throughout the first act, the public sees the defects of mankind represented in the two characters, and the play makes them acutely aware of the absurdity of the Cuban situation of that time. Choteo makes it easier for one to laugh at a serious situation, and that is how it is used in *El flaco y el gordo*. El flaco is bitter that el gordo is treated better than he is at the hospital, simply because of the wealthy man's ability to pay for additional services. When he confronts el gordo, in no way does el gordo deny this reality:

Flaco. Es que te pasas el santo día con la comida en la boca.

Gordo. Tengo los billetes suficientes para adquirirla. No tengo la culpa que mi padre me dejara una fortunita (247).

El gordo suggests that if el flaco is not satisfied with his free rations, and here he emphasizes the word free, he should simply order from the à-la-carte menu: “Ahora bien, si no le basta con la generosa ración que ofrece, gra-tui-ta-men-te, el hospital, entonces haga como yo: pida a la carta” (247). It seems like an innocent suggestion on the surface, but both these men know full well that this option is not feasible for el flaco, just as it would not be a privilege available to the majority of Cuban citizens at that time. Their financial situations would restrict their access to these allegedly superfluous items. Piñera’s choteo between characters also serves as a cultural choteo in which powerful and wealthy individuals are the target and where the critique is centered around maintaining the status quo. This choteo acknowledges the economic gap and class conflict in Cuba and responds to corruption in the system by creating an exaggerated example of what that looks like in the character of el gordo.

El gordo appears to sympathize with el flaco at certain moments. He establishes a false sense of camaraderie with el flaco in order to continue exerting his authority over the other. Even if his intentions were honorable, el gordo’s empathy is limited due to his position in the upper classes of Cuban society. El gordo even claims that “el hambre vuelve loco a cualquiera” (250). This declaration is in regards to his own hunger and marks an erroneous attempt at equating his situation with that of el flaco, but it is of course more relevant to el flaco’s situation than el gordo can ever imagine. In fact, true hunger is part of why el flaco is in the hospital in the first place: he broke his leg trying to steal food to eat. El gordo can never truly comprehend this kind of hunger. He has seemingly never suffered from lack of necessities. For all his attempts to identify with el flaco, he simply cannot relate.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ One could suggest that, given the cyclical nature of power as presented in this play, el gordo may have started out as el flaco at an earlier stage. It is possible that he too ate yet another former fat man to take his place. However,

When the time actually comes to order their food, it is apparent that the options for el flaco are quite limited. El gordo tries to place further restrictions on what his roommate can have by telling el flaco that he cannot tolerate yucca and that el flaco must request something else; but there is nothing else. El gordo eventually gives in to the serving of the yucca by admitting that el flaco “está en su derecho” to receive it (254). This is done to make el gordo appear generous, when in fact it is one of the few food items to which he cannot deny el flaco access. This behavior is similar to the polarized class structure and situation in Batista’s Cuba prior to the arrival of Castro and the Revolution: citizens struggled to satisfy basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, and education), let alone gain access to anything else. Survival for the lower classes was a daily struggle and Piñera takes this opportunity to remind his Cuban audience of the social, political, and economic issues faced in their own country.

The food arrives and el gordo escalates his choteo. He invites his roommate to dine with him but, after being questioned about the specifics of this by el flaco, clarifies that it is only an invitation to dine at the same table, *not* to share food. El gordo’s choteo in this scene is similar to that which Mañach looked down on: it simply ridicules the other through a demonstrated lack of respect, is discriminatory in nature, and serves to do nothing more than reduce or humiliate its target. Eventually, el flaco accepts the invitation and comes to the table with the promise of receiving one of el gordo’s fritters:

Flaco. (*llegando hasta la mesa*) Deme una fritura.

even if this was the case, he is currently far removed from that world and no longer sympathizes with those who remain below him as el flaco/el nuevo gordo seems to do at the end of the play. Since Piñera does not provide us with el gordo’s history, this is unclear, but this interpretation would suggest an even deeper level of criticism about the construction of power throughout Cuban history.

Gordo. [i]De mil amores! (*le indica la silla*) Pero tome asiento. Si bien es cierto que el acto de comer una fritura no constituye una comida en sí, con todo, es una invitación al banquete. (*pausa*) Bien, le daré esa fritura, pero con una condición.

Flaco. Ya empezamos con las condiciones.

Gordo. En esta vida todo es condicional. (*pausa*) Si usted dice correctamente la receta para la confección de frituras de seso, le daré... [i]una fritura de seso! (257)

From this point on, el gordo's choteo is in full force. These interactions are a game to him, and el flaco is just a toy. He knows that el flaco will not succeed, but he is entertained. El gordo makes el flaco work for his food. But it is food that he will never receive. When el flaco fails to recite the recipe to el gordo's satisfaction, el gordo denies him this food. This relates to the basic definition that Mañach provides for choteo: "no tomar nada en serio" (15). In no way does el gordo take el flaco's hunger seriously.

El gordo even returns to this same form of choteo later when he requests that el flaco recite the recipe for chicken with rice. Once again, el flaco falls victim to the choteador's desire for amusement:

Gordo. Pues mi idea es la siguiente: como la única música que pueden tolerar mis oídos es la música comestible, se me ha ocurrido que a medida que yo vaya comiendo el arroz con pollo usted deleite mis oídos con la lectura de la receta para la confección de dicho plato. Tenga, aquí la tiene. (*le entrega el papel al Flaco*)

Flaco. (*pasando la vista por el papel*) Es más larga que una novela. Es mucha lectura para una sola molleja. Dame un poco de arroz.

Gordo. Veremos. Todo dependerá de la ejecución. Le advierto desde ahora que tengo un oído educadísimo para la música comestible. (*pausa*) ¿Quiere empezar, por favor? (262)

El gordo targets his companion with empty promises of extra food. Just as “música comestible” is not something that can actually be consumed, neither is the extra food that el gordo vows to share. It sounds good, but it will never truly satisfy. According to Mañach, “No sería el choteo... todo lo peligroso que generalmente es, si se limitara a ser esa risa sin objeto. Lo más frecuente es que lo tenga y que ese objeto sea su víctima” (64). During this first scene, el flaco is an object to el gordo and therefore the choteador’s victim. This objectification gives el gordo the ability to separate himself from el flaco’s reality and simultaneously projects Piñera’s pessimism onto the audience.

Each time el gordo offers el flaco a new item of food the audience understands that el flaco will never enjoy that food. But el flaco holds out hope; he continues to work for the promise of food. And after multiple attempts at reciting the first portion of the recipe for chicken and rice, el gordo finally decides to “reward” el flaco for his efforts with a single forkful of rice:

Gordo. (*saltando en la silla*). ¡Bravo, bravo! Es tan excitante como una película pornográfica. (*coge un poco de arroz con el tenedor, al Flaco*). Abra la boca...

(*El Flaco abre la boca*)

Gordo. (*metiendo el tenedor con arroz en la boca del Flaco*). Se lo ha ganado. Eso es lo que se dice un pasaje bien interpretado. Ahora prosiga.

(*El Flaco sigue con la boca abierta*).

Gordo. (*Le cierra la boca al Flaco*). Lea bien, y ya veremos si le doy otro bocado. (265)

Here el gordo is the authority figure from the upper classes, and el flaco is the average lower-class citizen who is being repressed. This is an excellent example of giving just enough so that the other does not rebel or fight back. Just as the upper classes of Cuban society placate the lower classes with tastes of life's small pleasures, so too does el gordo appear to cater to el flaco's desires. With this small taste, el flaco craves more, and as a result he will work harder for just another small taste. He thinks that this time, perhaps, there will be an even greater reward (a bigger bite perhaps?), because he actually received his reward the first time around. Predictably, he never tastes another bite, and this withholding of food relates directly to the differences between the poor and the wealthy on the island. The interaction between the two characters considers the mockery that is what the wealthy, or those in power, are willing to provide to those with little means, in exchange for their work. When el flaco finally finishes reciting the recipe, el gordo is seen sticking the final bite into his mouth, and once again el flaco has been tricked into satisfying el gordo without receiving anything in return:

(A medida que el Flaco da lectura al párrafo final, el Gordo se mete en la boca la última cucharada de arroz y acto seguido pincha la molleja y también se la come).

Flaco. ¿Pero qué haces...? Y[, ¿]mi molleja?

Gordo. *(casi sin poder articular por la cantidad de comida que tiene en la boca).* La... mo... La... mo... *(risas).* La molle... *(nuevas risas).* Ja... Ja... *(lanza granos de arroz de la boca).* La molleja... ¡Ja, ja, ja, ja! (268).

The combination of the word molleja and the sound of laughter is a prime example of how el gordo uses choteo to torment el flaco. It is the final move in his game; the object of his laughter has satisfied him, and he has won.

Piñera's choice of foods for this scene is no coincidence, and in this case the choteo operates between the playwright and the audience. These are not just any fritters but are made with calf brains; the molleja, or sweetbread, is another organ meat that would likely be reserved for the wealthy because of their expense; and the rice is something that is more accessible to the average person than the other two foods. Piñera's choices in foods emphasize the differences between the two characters – specifically in terms of access to knowledge, food, and power.

At this point in the play, it is unlikely that the reader or spectator sympathizes with el gordo on any level. He has made himself completely unlikable to any audience but especially to one in 1959 Cuba. Cuban society of the late 1950s is very much reflected in this interaction, and el gordo is representative of the oppression so many Cubans faced at that time. While I did not find any specific audience reactions to the few performances that took place, Leal suggests that “para el crítico, ‘El flaco y el gordo’ es una aburrida experiencia teatral; para el espectador medio, una ‘epatante’ historia canibalesca; para el teatro cubano, el estreno más alucinante de 1959” (*En primera persona* 116-17). If *El flaco y el gordo* is such a boring theatrical experience for critics, why then might Leal suggest that the play is the most fascinating premiere of the year? The idea that the victim has the potential to overcome the oppressor highlights the successes experienced by the Cuban Revolution. While the average spectator may only see an amazing cannibalistic story, Leal acknowledges that the symbolism found in the character portrayals represents much more. El gordo's use of choteo shows the darker side of this humor that Mañach discusses, but the text is also choteando with the audience through this character.

Considering the fact that Cuba was only nine months into the newly established revolutionary government, it is likely that the ability of the audience to relate to the events in this act would cause empathy for el flaco; however, as I will later demonstrate, there is also humor to be found in the plot.

Another element of this play that might interest audiences is the alliance that el gordo has with the servant who brings the food. This hospital employee represents the maintenance of the status quo among social classes. He is not a rich man, but he accepts that el gordo holds the power simply because he has the money. He jokes along with el gordo at the expense of el flaco, presumably so that he does not become the next target of el gordo's choteo. It is easier to laugh at el flaco than to attempt to change his situation. Rather than countering the imposed national consciousness of the ruling class, el serviente tolerates that to which he has been subjected. As a member of what could be considered the working class, el serviente does not consider himself to be a part of el flaco's social or economic class and therefore he willingly participates in perpetuating the victimization of the poor, hungry man. He represents something of a middle-man between the victim and the victimizer, doing his best to avoid el gordo's attacks by joining in the persecution of el flaco. He shows no indication of stepping out of this role, even in the second scene when el flaco becomes the new fat man. His acceptance of this situation is yet another critique made by Piñera using a character's involvement in choteo to demonstrate the issues of Cuban resignation. For el serviente, this is the way things have always been and this is the way they will continue to be.

Of course, the situation is not that simple, and at the end of the first scene we have a crucial plot twist:

TELÓN. (*Una vez que el telón se ha bajado, se escuchará, cantada, la siguiente cuarteta:*)

Aunque el mundo sea redondo

Y Juan no se llame Paco,

Es indudable que al Gordo

Siempre se lo come el Flaco. (*tres veces*)

(*Inmediatamente se levanta el telón*) (269)

With this, el flaco is converted into the *grand* choteador when he literally eats el gordo. While it seemed that hunger would consume el flaco, in the end, it actually drove him to devour el gordo. It appears as though the original victim has won the game. However, it is necessary to consider the consequences of this action in changing the already established hierarchy. El flaco has now become el gordo.

Even his first words as the curtain rises on the second scene reflect the change that he has gone through, not just in weight, but also in attitude:

Flaco. (*con afectación, tirando al suelo la tibia*). ¡Qué banquetazo! (*se pasa la mano por la barriga*). ¡Oh, perdonen la expresión, pero con los tiempos que corren...! (*pausa*) Me expresaré cultamente: un banquete a lo Enrique Octavo... (269)

El flaco has eaten el gordo and, simply stated, has become the new fat man, even going as far as comparing himself with England's Henry the Eighth. His behavior as he discards the bones shows him choteando with the audience. He tries to display a certain degree of innocence, but at

the same time he wishes for the audience to recognize that he is aware of his actions and that he is not ashamed. He is both proud and amused by his accomplishment. He even brags about how he did it, his description of how he cut el gordo to pieces and ate him, little by little, is rather graphic:

Flaco. ¿Quieren saber cómo lo hice? Pues el Gordo se durmió con un sueño de piedra. Imagínense: el arroz con pollo, las frituras, la molleja... Le hice un agujerito con el cuchillo y se fue desangrando. Entonces lo corté en pedazos y me lo fui comiendo poco a poco, (*pausa*). Me supo a faisán (270).

El flaco's choice of the pheasant as a point of comparison with the taste of el gordo is pure choteo. "Me supo a faisán" is a phrase that, in Spanish, indicates that el flaco enjoyed the flavor of el gordo tremendously. Because of the value of this bird and el flaco's social position, it is also unlikely that he has ever eaten pheasant before in his life and is therefore repeating a common expression used to indicate the rich flavors of what he has just eaten. This scene strikes me as symbolic of the rise of the new revolutionary leadership, who, after many years of oppression, fought back against Batista's regime and won. Although this scene involves two individuals, it can also represent the greater Cuban situation of the time. Here I consider that Piñera was choteando with his spectators in order to ask them to scrutinize the new authority figures and how those behaviors are reflected in the actions of el flaco, now the new gordo. If the new government is represented in el flaco, would it too become as (power) hungry as the skinny man? While this interpretation is not confirmed to be Piñera's official stance, I consider it one of the reasons that prompted the censoring of the work in Cuba, because the newly established

regime was not known to be open to criticism and questioning. And when yet another *new* skinny man enters the scene in the last moments of the play, it seems as though the original flaco (again, now el gordo) fears himself to be the next victim.

The ending of this play can be read in different ways. In one instance, it can be read as though the skinny-man-turned-fat-man wishes for the new flaco to be removed from his room so that he can sit back and live the life of el gordo without any reminders of his former life. The mere presence of the new flaco will serve as a constant reminder of this past. This new relationship and power dynamic is representative of an inability to escape the vicious cycle of power. When one authority figure is ousted, another will take his place. No matter how much the new fat man sees himself as different from those who came before, he will repeat the errors of his predecessors. The way in which he treats the new skinny man is evidence of this cyclical behavior as he attempts to dismiss the new patient from his room. He claims that the newcomer's presence is a mistake and that he does not want this other person, someone who is eerily similar to his earlier self, right down to the same broken leg, to be in the same room as he is. This new addition represents the repetition of history and the continual cycle of struggle between the skinny men and fat men of the world.

This interpretation would explain the censorship issues *El flaco y el gordo* faced in the 1960s and 1970s. As Luis F. González Cruz states, "Claro que la tesis que plantea esta obra no conviene a la Revolución, pues si la Revolución ha sido hecha por el flaco, al convertirse en gordo le esperará el mismo destino: ser destruida por un próximo flaco. Por este motivo Piñera se abstuvo de hacer comentario alguno respecto a esta pieza en su prólogo al *Teatro completo*" (55). As previously stated, the play was understood by these new authority figures as a work that not only criticized Batista, but also Castro. If el flaco exemplified the common man, who Castro

claimed to represent, then his transition into the new fat man would surely project the message that Castro himself would become like Batista and those before him, just another fat man holding power over the rest of the population.⁷⁰ For Mañach, “El espíritu de independencia que siempre hierve al fondo del choteo, tiene dos vías de escape: o la rebeldía franca, o la adulación” (70). This play was not necessarily rebellious in its intent; however, it was interpreted as counterrevolutionary because there was no overt flattery of the new government. *El flaco y el gordo* could be considered an allegory for the change of regime, and, through the role of the skinny-man-turned-fat-man, the play shows a fear that the Revolution would duplicate the leadership methods of Batista.

Another way in which to interpret the ending of this play, and this is the position I support, is that there is still hope. El flaco recognizes that he is the new gordo and realizes that stopping the cycle is up to him. This reaction correlates with Piñera’s beliefs about the Revolution in those early years: he was hopeful for its success, but he was cautious. As González Cruz affirms, “En cuanto a *El flaco y el gordo*, más que una obra de contenido político, lo que hay en ella es el escéptico tratamiento de un tema social” (55). While I argue that although one cannot escape the political in the theater, especially in Cuba at this time, it appears as though the intention of Piñera’s message is as much social as it is political. I argue that *El flaco y el gordo* should be read as a suggestion to the new government and the Cuban people that they must not allow the cycle to continue. Acknowledging the historical precedent for the cyclical nature of

⁷⁰ Even Ernesto Guevara admits, in his 1964 essay “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba,” that socialism is not yet perfect. He states, “El socialismo es joven y tiene errores. Los revolucionarios carecemos, muchas veces de los conocimientos y la audacia intelectual necesarios para encarar la tarea del desarrollo de un hombre nuevo por métodos distintos a los convencionales y los métodos convencionales sufren de la influencia de la sociedad que los creó” (12). Guevara suggests that it is possible to overcome these issues through education. Piñera’s flaco-turned-gordo has not yet learned that lesson and so he is at risk of becoming a victim of what came before, just as Castro would be at risk of following the conventional methods of previous leaders.

government is an important first step. The second is acting to break the cycle through truly revolutionary actions that will benefit all Cubans. The hope lies in the belief that this can be achieved. However, since the social is intrinsically connected to the political, and even more so in Cuba from 1959 onward, it is impossible to consider this work without considering the political situation on the island at that time, during which any questioning of, or even simply reflecting upon, this situation was considered counterrevolutionary.

The humorist creates a comedic display from what is least spectacular; and the choteador ridicules authority. Piñera does both with *El flaco y el gordo*: he makes a spectacle of hunger, something clearly not spectacular, and at the same time he mocks authority. In 1964, Piñera explains that “el pasado se puede contar casi siempre a base de chistes y anécdotas, aunque fuera muy serio...” (“El teatro actual” 95). And although I make the assumption that Piñera was hesitant to say so, I would argue that the same could be said about the present and the future. Piñera lacked a complete and unwavering confidence in the revolutionary system due more to the political history of his country than to the Revolution itself. Because of this position, he wrote *El flaco y el gordo*, incorporating a choteo that revolved around the theme of food and access to food, in order to advise the Cuban people, and perhaps even the Castro regime, to be cautious moving forward. His political stance also impacted his ability to stage many of his works.

It was Piñera’s belief that Cuban theater had the ability to become great. In order to achieve this, he suggests, “Hay que hacer un teatro, que aun cuando con elementos fantásticos, absurdos, etc., tenga pase real, y sobre todo profesional. Cuando esas dos cosas se consigan, tendremos el comienzo de la gran escena cubana, que hasta este momento es tentativa y ensayo” (“El teatro actual” 97). Unfortunately, due to the political circumstances in the country during the 1960s and even later, a full realization of this greatness was largely suppressed.

La paz en el sombrero: Choteo, Capitalism, and Socialism

It is well established that there were very few published works written by female Cuban playwrights in the 1960s, but of those able to have their works produced and distributed, Gloria Parrado is perhaps the best known. Parrado (1927-1986) resided in Cuba for most of her life.⁷¹ Orphaned at the age of thirteen, she worked as a maid for a period of time before learning how to read and write. As an adult, she joined with the “Movimiento 26 de julio” and was actively involved until the triumph of the Revolution. In addition to writing plays, she also acted and directed for the theater, and wrote novels and short stories (Camps 6-10).

Catherine Davies, in her book *A Place in the Sun? Women Writers in Twentieth-Century Cuba*, postulates that “one might have expected more publications from women in a self-proclaimed egalitarian society avid for reading material,” but in fact such was not the case (124). Davies goes on to write that “relatively few plays have been published by women since the Revolution despite the fact that many women wrote plays which were regularly performed on stage in the 1940s and 1950s” and that “no woman has found a place in the Cuban canon of dramatists (Virgilio Piñera, José Brene, Héctor Quintero and so on)” (124). Even if Parrado may not be considered a canonical Cuban playwright, her additional work, as a theater critic, actress, and theater professor, is likely to have furthered her success to a greater degree than other women in her field at that time.

During this period, theater in Cuba in general was moving towards a more collective experience than ever before, and though many women participated in the theater world within the Revolution, Davies points out that “individual women’s names (unlike the names of men,

⁷¹ Parrado relocated to the United States for a brief period after the death of political activist Eduardo Chibás in 1951. She returned to Cuba and remained there after the coup by Batista in 1952.

such as Sergio Corrieri) tend to get lost in collective authorship projects” (124).⁷² Gloria Parrado was one of the few women who received individual recognition during this time, and, ironically, this is likely connected to her experiences in the collaborative theater groups similar to Corrieri’s.⁷³ While Parrado wrote a good deal prior to the Revolution, the majority of her works were written after the rise of Castro. The Cuban-Marxist mentality of the 1960s is clearly reflected in *La paz en el sombrero*, especially considering that the primary target of her criticism is a capitalist government. This anti-capitalist position is another argument in favor of her relative success during the early years of the Revolution.

In their introduction to *Dramaturgas latinoamericanas contemporáneas*, Elba Andrade and Hilde F. Cramsie confirm that “con el triunfo de la Revolución su teatro da un giro rotundo, impregnándose de una visión de mundo positiva hacia el futuro, corriendo el peligro de bordear en el maniqueísmo en sus postulados sociopolíticos” (64). It is commonly accepted that Parrado’s critique in *La paz* is of the capitalist government of the United States, and it appears in certain instances that she may have been catering to the desires of the revolutionary government; however, I suggest there could be a message for the Cuban government in this play as well. Since her obvious target is the capitalist enemy, Parrado is not censored in any way, but, like *El flaco y el gordo*, *La paz en el sombrero* acknowledges the idea that there is a cyclical nature to governing and that escape from past mistakes is difficult for each new and incoming governing body.

⁷² Sergio Corrieri (1938-2008) was a Cuban actor and a founding member of the theater collective *Teatro Escambray* (1968). He served as artistic director of the group for many years (Prizant 17). This likely explains why his name is often attributed to many of the productions they created.

⁷³ José Triana clarifies that “no es Gloria Parrado la única dramaturga que escribió en esta etapa, retengo a Dora Alonso, a Nora Badía, a Daysis Guira, a María Álvarez Ríos y a Silvia Barros, sin embargo fue entre ellas la que explora una mayor complejidad en la comunicación con el público de su época” (*El tiempo xx*). Again, I argue that one way in which Parrado accomplished this complex communication was through the use of choteo.

La paz en el sombrero takes place after the rise of a new government in what is supposedly a capitalist nation. The play is divided into eleven scenes that alternate between the leader's office and the lives of the average citizen. A war has just ended and the new government has been established. Throughout the play the Major discovers that leading the people during times of peace is more difficult than he originally thought. He is accustomed to leading soldiers during war, but not making decisions about how to maintain peace. He turns to his ministers for solutions, but they too are only experienced in their individual specialties (war, economics, the state) and their suggestions only seem to exacerbate the issues. One of the few voices of reason, the Head of Science, is continuously shut down by the other leaders. The problems of the new government are evidenced through the people, in scenes interspersed throughout the play (scenes two, four, five, eight, and ten). These scenes demonstrate the different reactions of the people to the new government: the widow and the disabled man take advantage of the shop keeper; the soldiers stationed outside of the country consider rebelling; the workers go on strike; and there is overall dissatisfaction with the direction of the country. By the end of the play, the people take up arms to overthrow the leadership.

According to David Camps, in his introduction to Parrado's collection *Teatro*, social inequality had a dramatic influence on her writing, and both the social and the political exist in many of her works, but without a doubt in *La paz*. Camps explains:

[E]l triunfo revolucionario del 1 de enero de 1959 y el rápido proceso de cambios en la estructura socioeconómica del país, amplían la perspectiva social de conjunto de la escritora. La nueva perspectiva social provoca un giro radical en su interpretación de la

realidad y por esta causa, el yo y mi circunstancia se convierte en la circunstancia y nosotros, lo cual significa una nueva expresión en la proyección social de sus obras. (15)

This is evident in *La paz* as Parrado tackles the issue of what to do after war has ended. Although the play focuses primarily on the Major and his cabinet members, the impact that their decisions have on the general population is evident as well. Parrado, not so subtly, reminds her revolutionary audience that the decisions of those in charge greatly influence the populace and, in turn, the successes of the country as a whole. While Camps does not describe what methods Parrado uses to achieve this new form of expressing herself, I will show that, albeit not exclusively, choteo is one element that she incorporated into her writing to reinforce both social and political concerns.

Flora Díaz Parrado, discussed in the last chapter, had her work published, but was unable to see it staged. Gloria Parrado, on the other hand, had the opposite problem. Whereas she was considered “possibly the most successful female dramatist of the post-1959 years” and *La paz en el sombrero* was performed in 1961, the dramatic text was not published until 1984 (Davies 135).⁷⁴ This lack of publication of an award-winning production shows that while things had begun to change for female playwrights, there was still a considerable gap between their successes and those of their male counterparts.⁷⁵ Though Parrado’s work was a lived experience for those in the audience, it would be another 23 years before readers would have access to this work. In fact, for someone who was “possibly the most successful female dramatist” of her era, there is relatively little information about her. While Antonio J. Molina’s book, *Mujeres en la*

⁷⁴ I have been unable to locate any information as to where this play was performed, simply that it “was performed in the 1960-61 season” (Davies 135).

⁷⁵ *La paz en el sombrero* also won the Casa de las Américas award in 1961.

historia de Cuba, briefly mentions Flora Díaz Parrado (albeit not as an author but as the founder of the Comisión Interamericana de la Mujer) and Carmen Duarte (discussed briefly in the introduction, and who is only labeled as a “dramaturga que vive en el exilio”), there is absolutely no mention of Gloria Parrado. Perhaps this omission is because of her involvement in the revolutionary government, but I have found no specific evidence to support or refute that.

Gloria Parrado, writing from within the revolutionary system, still managed to use choteo to articulate that with which she did not agree. Montes Huidobro argues that “lo mejor [de lo que había escrito] ya lo tenía escrito antes de 1959” (*El vórtice* 286). Perhaps that is arguable, since her writing after that year was largely influenced by the Revolution, although I would imagine that Montes Huidobro’s generally anti-Castrista position affected his evaluation of Parrado’s later works. Whether or not *La paz en el sombrero* (1961) can be counted among her better plays, I have chosen it not for the quality of the piece in its entirety but rather for its use of choteo by a Cuban playwright writing *within* the revolution and in support of the revolution or, at least, a playwright who was not considered counter-revolutionary, as both Piñera and Triana were at one point or another. Very few critics have referred to Parrado as a rebel, and, in fact, many have spoken to how she wrote what she thought the revolutionary government wanted to hear and/or see, but José Triana credits her with doing more. He writes, in the prologue to *El tiempo en un acto*, that “como mujer e intelectual fue un ejemplo de valentía, rebeldía y de arrogancia insobornable. Lo que creía lo decía sin rodos y a ratos con crueldad... Sus textos sufren de rebeldía amorfa y de ausencia. Todo en su escritura aparece en ciernes y es que un hacedor de teatro necesita imperiosamente el escenario” (xxi). Even though Triana says little else about her, and when he does he is not necessarily complimenting her work, he acknowledges that she is willing to write about topics she thinks need to be addressed.

It is really only David Camps, the Cuban theater critic, who speaks about Parrado in detail, lending insight into what drove her writing. His introduction to her collected works, entitled “Decirte quiero,” is written in the form of a dialogue between two individuals, “Él” and “Yo,” who discuss Parrado’s life and writing. Camps explains that “fue en La Habana, al tener que luchar por subsistir, que empezó a cobrar forma consciente, a hacerse clara la imagen de la pobreza, del hambre. Abría los ojos como una recién nacida” (7). Given this background information on Parrado, it is not surprising that she was supportive of a revolutionary government that sought to provide a greater level of equality among Cubans. It is also unsurprising then that she chose to write about the social and historical realities within Cuba. Part of that social reality would almost necessarily involve choteo, something intrinsically connected to Cuban life.

Camps proceeds to discuss *La paz...*, in particular, through the presentation of a lively discourse between his two characters about the level of poetry found in the play. “Yo” argues that on a basic level a play that “se desarrolla en el despacho del Mayor, reunido con sus ministros, discutiendo acerca de la paz y la guerra mientras el pueblo se prepara para hacer una revolución” does not appear to be poetic. But “Él” insists that “la poesía se desprende de la lucha del pueblo por obtener su libertad” (Camps 19). This poetry is a large component of Parrado’s writing, but I also consider the viewpoints and actions of the various ministers to further understand the author’s position toward the situation.

During the 1960s, and even more so in the decades that followed, there was a decrease in the amount of choteo presented in the theater. Parrado’s play proved an exception to this because her choteo was directed at the enemy: capitalism and, tangentially, the United States. Such a use of choteo would be supported by the revolutionary government, and Parrado took advantage of

the ability to include it in her work. Camps reminds us that “la burla es arma peligrosa y así lo comprendió la escritora” (22). This is evident throughout the play but most notably in the first few scenes.

Since on the surface, this play is not critical of the Cuban government, the revolutionary powers may not necessarily see themselves represented in these ministers; but it is quite possible to consider this particular criticism as present in *La paz en el sombrero*. Camps suggests that the characters in this play represent “el gobierno de un país capitalista [que] discute, terminada la guerra, la conveniencia o no de la paz. Es un país guerrerista, muy parecido por cierto a Estados Unidos. El Mayor podría ser Nixon, Carter o Reagan” (20). The audience is meant to understand that this critique is specifically geared toward capitalism, but I argue that it could also be directed toward any government struggling to decide what was best for its people. This disapproval of a capitalist government would easily rationalize why the revolutionary government did not have a problem with the work itself and why it was not critical of the choteo used in the play, since that choteo was not openly directed at Castro’s leadership. To convince her audience to consider such a possibility Parrado used choteo beginning, I argue, with the title of the play. On one level, the Major does wear a hat, but he is certainly unable to keep the peace. While the hat represents his position of power, it is really nothing more than an empty symbol. But what if the title, *La paz en el sombrero*, is not a reference to the Major’s attire but rather one of Cuban leadership? Is the title then serious, or is it still choteo? The answer is not so clear. Revolutionary leadership was often recognized through their particular head wear (e.g., Guevara’s beret, Castro’s patrol cap, and Camilo Cienfuegos’s Stetson), so it could allude to peace brought by these leaders, or it could, and this I consider more likely, be choteo in the same vein as that directed at capitalist

leadership. Simply because leaders *look* a certain way does not indicate that they are qualified to run a country.

The initial stage directions for the play state that “*todas las escenas deberán hacerse muy simples, excepto el despacho del Mayor que será clásico*” (Parrado 77). Even this very first description of what the expectations for the staging will be evokes the suggestion of choteo. In evaluating the bigger picture, it is possible to consider this a critique of any government with differentiated power structures. As such, *La paz en el sombrero* could also become a critique of the Cuban government.

As the curtain rises on the opening scene in the Major’s office, the stage directions further set up the impending choteo. They describe the Major’s office as “*lujosamente amueblado. Puertas a derecha e izquierda en los ángulos del foro, entre las cuales hay un gran ventanal con un balcón que sale ligeramente. A ambos lados del balcón, entre éste las puertas, sendos cuadros: uno del abuelo del Mayor (un general cargado de medallas) y el otro de Roma, incendiada por Nerón*” (78). These symbolic representations of luxury, nepotism, and conquest foreshadow the attitudes and behaviors of the Major as well as allude to choteo against that particular character on behalf of the playwright.⁷⁶ This is all the background necessary on the Major; from the description of his office alone the reader/spectator can infer his social class, background, rise to power, and future decline.

⁷⁶ The way in which the office is decorated in general represents the luxury of the ruling class. The portrait of the Major’s grandfather alludes to nepotism which led the Major to his current position; and the portrait of Nero and the burning of Rome foreshadows of the way in which the Major will be viewed later and also represents the decadence and future decline of the regime. Richard Beacham states, “The ‘worst’ emperors such as Caligula, Nero, Domitian, and Commodus, all persecuted the Senate while courting the adoration of the mob by providing the most memorable of lavish entertainments. Nero’s reign was viewed with horror by Roman historians, but he had been intensely popular with the general populace who revered him centuries after his death” (*The Roman Theatre and its Audience* 192). The Major’s concern lies more in how the people perceive him than in what actions are required to achieve that image.

Very shortly thereafter, the various members of the Major's cabinet are introduced, among them the Ministers of Economy, State, and War as well as the Chamber President and the Head of Science. While waiting in the Major's office for the leader to arrive, they discuss his delay:

Ministro de la Guerra. Ya el Mayor debía estar aquí.

Ministro de Estado. Habría sido mejor ir a esperarlo.

Ministro de Estado. Se le dijo que del barco viniera hacia aquí

Presidente de las cámaras. También yo tengo otras cosas que hacer.

Ministro de la Guerra. ¿Creerá él que porque ganó la guerra el mundo se detiene? (78)

It is in this last line, spoken by the Minister of War where choteo is introduced via the characters. He lets the spectators know that he and the other ministers are already critical of the Major's tardiness. Just as a small child would believe that the world revolves around him, so too is this Major being accused of thinking that the world stops simply because the war has been won. He does not yet consider what comes next, he simply enjoys the moment of victory. This comment seems to open the flood gates for the remaining ministers as they join in the commentary about their new leader:

Ministro de Estado. No seamos duros, después de todo, derecho tiene a demorarse.

Ministro de Economías. Derecho ninguno. Nadie lo mandó a ganar la guerra y regresar antes de lo convenido.

Ministro de la Guerra. Si hubiera actuado correctamente, habría dilatado un par de años más el asunto.

Ministro de economías. A mí me ha causado grandes perjuicios. Tuve que movilizar la Bolsa o los valores se venían al suelo. ¡Todo por su heroicidad! (79)

Not only are these Ministers choteando against their leader, they are choteando about peace. They are at a loss as to what to do in times of peace, and they feel that their leader rushed the end of the war, something which has led to various problems for each of them. They suggest that had the Major not been so focused on being the hero, they could have dragged out the process of war a bit longer in order to serve their own purposes. The Minister of War follows up this interaction with his interpretation of what this new peace will mean for the country, claiming “¡La paz, la paz! Nuestro país no vivirá días de gloria comparables a éstos pasados en la guerra. ¡Qué precios! ¡Hay que ver qué precios!” (79). Even to imply that life was better during the war is choteo. There is truth in these words, especially in regards to the economic situation that this country faces, but there is also a sort of resigned humor that indicates that the situation will never be better economically than it was during the war. The humor can be found by applying McGraw’s theory of the benign violation discussed in the dissertation’s introduction, but it can also be considered choteo, in particular, because it appears to take a sort of anti-authoritarian stance through the voices of these government officials rather than through the average citizen. Because this specific example criticizes the spokesman of the system and demonstrates discontent and frustration with the newly established government by a government official about the government that he serves, it is without a doubt choteo.

For these leaders, even the mere idea of being a pacifist is considered vulgar. At the same time that the Chamber President argues in favor of the war ending, he acknowledges the importance of war for their society in the first place. Each of these individuals (with the exception of the Head of Science, as we will see) suggests that, in order for the country to be successful especially in terms of its economic situation, war is a necessary component. This is something that would be a subject of mockery in 1960s Cuba: while it may be necessary for capitalist nations such as the United States, a nation following socialist principles, such as Cuba, should be able to find a more peaceful solution.

When the Major finally joins his ministers a short time later, he is accompanied by his wife, his messenger, and a photographer. He enters to the sounds of a military march and there is much pomp and circumstance around his arrival. If that were not bad enough, the photographer requests he reenter the room, presumably in an attempt to get better photos:

Fotógrafo. ¿Quiere volver a entrar, Mayor? (*El mayor sale y vuelve a entrar. Lleva el sombrero en la mano, saluda con él.*) Ahora saludando a los ministros. (*Va saludando a cada ministro, mientras el Fotógrafo tira sus flashes.*) ¡Magnífico, magnífico! Ahora con algunos héroes de la guerra. (*Al Ordenanza.*) ¡Páselos! (83)

This photographic performance is repeated with various people in attendance, including a disabled war veteran, a widow, and a small child. The photographer's attempt to capture a false spontaneity is a notable example of mockery toward an authority figure. This scene emphasizes how unnatural the Major's entrance into his office is. He is not able to simply enter and conduct business but must instead put on a show for the photographer who will then, presumably, choose

what he considers the best, and perhaps most “natural” of the shots to include in the newspaper. The choteo is expressed showing how this pomp and circumstance wastes time better spent conducting business. The audience is made aware of the falsity of the situation. Although this choteo presented to the audience through the photographer is specifically directed at capitalist nations, it could be a situation to which many new leaders might fall victim and could, arguably, also be applied to Cuba and Castro as he rose to power. There is clearly an increase in the number of photographs of the Revolutionary leader at this time, and while it may be unknown how many tries it took to get the best angle, one can assume that many of those published photographs were not the first attempt at getting the perfect shot. I contend that the censors would have focused on the denunciation of the capitalist governments of the world, and that they would have missed how a criticism of their own leader was possibly hidden within the text.

When the Head of Science questions the future leadership of the Major, the new leader laughs, exclaiming: “¡Vamos, amigo mío! No soy un hombre agresivo. Mi procedencia bélica indica que soy hombre de paz” (86). This statement is loaded with irony as it is unlikely that someone with a history in war will be able to maintain the peace. The Head of Science makes no argument as to whether or not the Major is a capable leader but rather if and how he will be able to lead in times of peace. He does not wish to be a part of any continuing violence and fears that it is the future direction of his country under the Major’s leadership. The Major insists that he will keep the peace and even goes as far as to declare this to the general population, who react to his promises with shouts of “¡Viva!” To conclude his speech (and the first scene) the Major asks the people, who are chanting for “¡Paz, paz, paz!”

Mayor. *¿Paz? (Se quita el sombrero y lo bate en el aire.) ¡Paz tendréis! (El Mayor descende del balcón. En este momento se siente un fuerte estampido. Todos se alarman.)*

¿Qué ha sido?

Ministro de la Guerra. No lo sé, es como una explosión.

El Ordenanza entra con una bandeja, copas y una botella de champán.

Ministro de Estado. ¡Oh! Alegría, ¡Brindemos por el gran futuro que se nos muestra!

Todos. ¡Brindemos! (88)

Although the scene ends in celebration of the Major's new leadership role, the end of the war, and the future that is to be, this celebration does not come worry free. This time the concern arises from the “*estampido*” made by the opening of the champagne bottle. When it is first opened, the bottle is not seen, but only heard. The Major and his men are startled by this sound due to similarities with the explosion of a bomb. This moment reflects the ways in which the war has become deeply ingrained in the lives of these new leaders. This, along with a flashback to the conversation with the Head of Science and the difficulties of military leaders leading in times of peace, can be considered a form of choteo in that it is critical of the system and how that system is run. I understand Parrado's message to be one in which she sides with the Head of Science, one in which she questions these men and their abilities to lead – whether they are capitalist leaders or any other leaders. Even her choice in the scientist as the sympathetic character shows that Parrado ridicules those who choose economic progress at the expense of social and scientific progress. The scientist knows what can be done, but he also knows what should be done. Parrado mocks the authority of these men in the last moments of this scene with the simple indication that they cannot tell the difference between the sounds of a champagne bottle and an explosion.

In my analysis of the remainder of the play, I will consider how these brief moments of humor are really veiled warnings and a demonstration of the playwright's fear of repeating the mistakes of the past. While not all scenes have choteo in them, they all seem to move toward the downfall of this military leadership and the rise of yet another. This first scene provides us with the greatest number of examples of choteo of any of the eleven scenes. For the remainder of the play the audience is presented with brief moments of choteo, but this first scene is crucial to the overall storyline and leads us to the eventual downfall of the new leadership by the play's end. The cycle will be repeated, war will return, and things will change very little. Parrado may poke fun at the United States, but she is also critical of Cuba's governing history. *La paz en el sombrero* demonstrates an opposition to the discourse of power through ridicule of a governing system that repeats itself, even under new leadership.

I speculate that just as Piñera used his play to serve as a precautionary warning to the new revolutionary government not to fall into the same cyclical trap that their predecessors had, so too does Parrado in *La paz en el sombrero*. However, her message may be completely lost on its target since she works from *within* the revolution to make her claims, using a capitalist system as an example of a failing government. The audience may or may not have caught this, but I think, to a reader today, it is quite clear that there is more to *La paz en el sombrero* than just choteando against the capitalist system. There is a fear of repetition of the same governing tactics being used and a questioning of the authority's ability to prevent that sort of repetition.

The second scene is a brief one in which a disabled war veteran and a widow (the same two who were photographed with the Major in the first scene) are in the market. These are two of the citizens exemplified in the Major's speech in the previous scene. The stage directions note that they "disfruten de los favores del Mayor y su mujer. Ambos adquirieron mercaderías para el

matrimonio” (89). As they choose items, they discuss the widow’s child. The veteran proposes that they rid themselves of the burden of the child by leaving him in an orphanage. But the widow acknowledges something that her companion has not considered:

Viuda. ¿Quieres que pierda sus favores? Ser viuda no es bastante; que el dolor no se ve. Si tuvieras rotas las costillas o el esternón y hasta las tripas, no tendrías ayuda de nadie. Lo que se presenta a los ojos es lo que se ve y sólo por ello se recibe. (90)

Her theory that she would no longer receive the support of the Major without the *tangible* burden of her son is a deep criticism of this government. She concludes that help is only given for what is seen. If the impact of the support is not witnessed by those providing assistance, it is not worth it. She suggests that aid only serves to benefit the giver and not the receiver. The veteran acknowledges the truth in this statement and indicates that it is important they stick together as each of their circumstances could be of help to the other.

When the shopkeeper questions them about not paying for the merchandise they have collected, they tell him to bill the Major and his wife. This is how Parrado imagines the capitalist system would work, or rather not work, when it comes to supporting its citizens. It may seem comical that anyone would expect the nation’s new leader to pay for these items, but is this choteo? I certainly consider this a form of using humor to discredit the culture and activities of the other. Here Parrado belittles the requirements and constraints of the capitalist system by showing how it would fail. And while the characters are not choteando with one another, Parrado writes her characters in a way that Cuban audiences can feel as though they are in on the joke against their northern neighbors.

Unemployment is the subject of the third scene of this play, and there the humor lies in the judgement of the proposed solutions to this problem. Not only are many individuals in the country without a job, but many soldiers will also return home and seek new forms of income. In order to solve this issue, the Minister of War proposes slowing down the return of the soldiers from war. By creating military bases in different countries of the world, the soldiers can remain employed without having any negative impact on the economy within the country:

Ministro de la Guerra. Imponer esas bases, con las cuales resolvemos varias cosas: primera, no licenciamos el ejército, sino que lo trasladamos a esas bases. Segunda, estando nuestras fuerzas distribuidas por el mundo, habrá otra guerra si queremos.

Tercera, los que reciban nuestra protección militar, tendrán que aceptar nuestros tratados comerciales. (97-98)

This absurd suggestion is a direct criticism of the United States, who has military bases all over the world and keeps many soldiers deployed even in times of peace. It deals with the idea of leaders who create international problems where they do not exist in order to attempt to solve domestic unemployment issues. In *La paz en el sombrero*, the solution to unemployment lies in preparing for future wars against unknown enemies and slowing the return and integration of soldiers into society.

It is interesting to consider Cuba in light of this scene as well. While the newly established Cuban government offered many solutions to dealing with unemployment in those early years, and was by no means a worldwide powerhouse in terms of its military holdings, it too found solutions to unemployment by sending soldiers to nations that Cuba thought needed its

assistance.⁷⁷ It is possible that Parrado alluded to this issue as well and that she thus not only ridiculed the imperial capitalist government to the north of Cuba, but her own nation. In both cases, sending soldiers to other parts of the world helped boost the economy. The cultural choteo used by Parrado in this scene mocks her nation's critique of its northern neighbor by alluding to the fact that Cuba is not as different as it would claim to be. It also implies a resignation that no better solution will be found.

During the fourth scene, the deployed soldiers are on the verge of rebelling because they have been prevented from returning home. They have waited months for orders to go back to their own country and still have not received them. Many are angered by their situation, but Soldier Three suggests that life is better outside the country as they have income, food, alcohol, and women where they are – all things that would be harder to obtain back home. He asks his compadres what they truly prefer:

Soldado 3. ¿Prefieren ustedes tener que trabajar como perros en una fábrica y que todo se vaya en impuestos? Aquí disfrutamos de los impuestos que pagan los tontos. Allí tendríamos que pagarlos nosotros y que otros los disfrutaran en un hermoso lugar. (103)

While this is not a surprising reaction from a soldier stationed far away from home, it is important to consider the soldier's belief that he has more freedom living outside his country. Again, considering that the intended critique is towards capitalist nations such as the US, the choteo against these nations is apparent: when their citizens prefer to live outside of the country because they believe that they have more freedom, that is a problem of authority. Soldier Three

⁷⁷ In the 1960s alone, Cuban armed forces were stationed in Algeria, Ghana, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda (Villafañá 84).

challenges the governing figures who have decided that he should remain stationed away from home by taking advantage of them without their realization. But could this not also be a critique of Parrado toward her own government? Is it not possible that she is suggesting that those working in factories and paying taxes in Cuba are the “tontos” that the third soldier is referring to here? Yes, everyone is playing their part in the new revolutionary society, but many are doing so by working in the factories or fields and by paying high taxes. Are they fools for following this plan? Are there others out there who could be taking advantage of them? All of this is possible and, as such, appears to be as much a challenge of Cuban leadership as it is of capitalist nations.

It seems as though the Major recognizes this change in mentality held by the third soldier and presumably many other soldiers just like him when he discusses the matter with the Minister of War later in the same scene:

Mayor. Hemos visitado distintos campamentos, en todos la misma situación. Estos soldados que antes obedecían ciegamente, ahora comienzan a sentirse civiles. Eso como si perdieran su consistencia.

Ministro de la Guerra. Le aconsejé que no terminara la guerra tan pronto. (106)

The Major’s comment about blind obedience is not an example of choteo with the Minister of War, but perhaps Parrado is choteando with her audience about the expectations of leadership and how it often fails to control the masses, both civil and military. The Minister of War’s comment about not ending the war so early is also interesting because here he implies that remaining at war would have been better for the Major’s control over the population from all sides. It is a polite version of “I told you so.” This conversation between the two characters is

simultaneously ridiculous and logical, and it may result in a moment of pause for the spectators as they consider their own situations. The expectation is that Cubans will not question their government but will instead follow the direction mandated by the revolutionary authorities. And when the Major suggests that perhaps the solution to their economic and social problems, as well as the potential uprising of the population, would be another war, the Minister of War is giddy with the possibility:

Mayor. Confieso que tantos conflictos juntos, me son un poco, digamos, cargantes... Y, ¿sería posible, en su opinión, que el anuncio de una nueva guerra aplaque los ánimos obreros de manera que tengamos una tregua?

Ministro de la Guerra. ¡Seguramente! ¡La guerra es bonanza para todos! Aunque las huelgas van a cesar pronto. El Ministro de Economías ha ordenado una amplia investigación. Los culpables caerán, ya verá. Hay gente oculta detrás de estos huelguistas... (107-108)

The irony of creating one problem in order to solve another is central here. Again, there is no choteo between the two characters; however, this is cultural choteo in that the audience is meant to understand and realize the absurdity of this situation. It also mocks the authority of the country's leadership, thus creating laughter which reflects a tinge of resignation. The Minister of War's denial that the people started the strike on their own, and that there were instead "dark forces" leading them to do what they want, is also quite comical, as many Cubans would recognize their own histories in this and identify past leaders in these characters.

The halfway point of the play shows the Major two years after he has come to power. He is seen discussing with the Head of Science whether or not the country has been experiencing peace. When the Major argues that he has established peace, the scientist disagrees. He explains that although the country has not been at war, there has been much unrest and violence among the people. The leader argues that violence and war are not the same thing, and that the problems that they are experiencing are routine issues, and nothing to worry about overall. This discussion is followed by a dialogue between the Major and his investigator. The leader expresses his concerns about the scientist and inquires about his behavior and what the investigator has found out:

Mayor. ¿Hizo algo sobre el científico?

Investigador. Sí, señor. Ese hombre es sumamente sospechoso...

Mayor. ¿Contactos con los huelguistas o algo parecido?

Investigador. No. Pero es un tipo raro. Pasa todo el tiempo leyendo o metido en el laboratorio, cosa mala en un hombre de su edad. Piensa demasiado... (119-20)

It is not that the Head of Science has done anything specific against the government, but simply that his general conduct seems to be too varied from that of the other leaders to be considered normative behavior. While the Head of Science is not directly involved in the strikes taking place with the steelworkers and other activists, simply “thinking too much” is enough to make him suspicious.

This example of cultural choteo can be looked at twofold: first, as commentary on outside governments who do not trust their own citizens to think for themselves and to simultaneously

continue supporting leadership; and second, as an assessment of the Cuban government at the time. It is choteo in the sense that it is humorously critical of leadership and the leaders' ability (or perhaps inability?) to consider opinions that differ from their own. The irony is that this choteo can be applied to both capitalist systems such as the United States and socialist systems such as Cuba. There is humor in the statement that the scientist thinks too much, but there is also a moment in which spectators might consider their own situation and recognize that they have been resigned to living in a similar situation. The impact on the audience may or may not have been effective in changing how audiences perceived their own governmental situation, but the possibility exists and thus demonstrates that the audience may be just like the Head of Science, thinking more than the expected government propaganda wishes and being condemned for it.

As the strikes continue and the prices of goods drop, the various ministers discuss their plans for market regulation. This stabilization of the economy is more important to them than feeding the millions of unemployed citizens, and they are even willing to throw away good food in order to solve their financial problem. They are indignant that the potato farmers would even question the need to do this, frustrated with the fact that these laborers do not understand how the market works. The Minister of Economy and the Minister of State exasperatedly discuss this situation:

Ministro de Economías. ¡Idiotas! ¿Y cómo quedó planteada la cosa?

Ministro de Estado. Que este año ellos botarían las papas, pero que para el próximo nosotros resolveríamos algo.

Ministro de Economías. ¡Menos mal! ¡Problema aplazado!

Ministro de Estado. Ahora falta que cese la huelga de los muelles. ¡Si se pudren las papas que lleguen, estamos listos!

Ministro de Economías. ¡Eso se resolverá! (121)

Although the potato farmers are eventually persuaded to dispose of much of their supply in order to keep prices competitive, they do not wish to do so knowing that so many of their fellow citizens are going hungry. The most critical aspect of this discussion between the two ministers, however, is in conjunction with the desire to end the strikes at the piers. In theory, the potatoes will rot because of the strikes, as there will be no one to deliver them to their final destinations, thus allowing the Ministers to drive up the prices even further. The ministers' entire line of thinking is disturbing as it does not consider people but only profit. It is clearly a critique of the capitalist nations of the world. The socialist regime of Cuba was quite critical of the blatant disregard for the needs of the people, and so Parrado's condemning portrayal of the situation would very much fall in line with official thinking. She uses choteo against an outside authority and so there is no risk of censorship as there was in other plays at that time.

In the eighth scene, as in the tenth scene, there is nothing humorous at all, let alone any choteo. These are both serious scenes which involve María, a woman searching for her adult son. She is unable to locate him and believes that he has been arrested for his involvement in the strikes. In the eighth scene, a protester named Zoila appears and delivers a note stating that María's son is safe, but she is not satisfied. She must find him herself as she fears he may have been killed for his political views. Zoila informs María that her son has in fact been imprisoned, but that she must not look for him and instead await further news. Scene ten takes place months later. María still has not seen her son, although Zoila promises that she will soon. When Zoila

takes this mother to find her missing son, it looks as though he has gone to war to fight against the Major and the other leaders. While María's search in these two scenes does not involve choteo, both scenes are critical of authority and demonstrate the doubts that people have as to whether or not the police will be honest or helpful. The difference between these two scenes and all of the others is the absence of onstage authority figures. The scenes where choteo is most prominent are those that involve the Major and his Ministers as they, and other leaders like them, are the intended target of this textual choteo. Parrado's criticism of authority in these scenes can be applied to both external and internal governing powers, but again, due to the overall tone of this play and some of the specific subjects addressed, it would likely not have been considered a threat by the Cuban government and Parrado was able to incorporate choteo in her text without concern for censorship of the piece.

In between these moments where María searches for her son, there is yet another glimpse of the struggles of the leadership in this imaginary nation. As the ninth scene opens, the Major speaks with his orderly about the former's leadership position. The orderly tries to encourage him and the work he does:

Ordenanza. El Mayor no puede fracasar. ¡Es bueno!

Mayor. ¡Eso no basta! Quizás un poco tarde lo comprendo. ¡No estoy capacitado para esta posición! (*Hace un gesto como de lanzar la pelota.*)

Ordenanza. No diga eso, Mayor. Su estrategia hizo avanzar a nuestro ejército hasta la misma sala de nuestro enemigo.

Mayor. ¡Todos hablan de mi estrategia! Esa estrategia no sirve para la paz.

Ordenanza. Y, ¿por qué tiene que haber paz, Mayor? Somos militares, ¡nuestro trabajo es la guerra! (131)

Again, the consideration that a return to war would be a potential solution to their leadership problems is presented. War will stimulate the economy, but it also signifies a return to fighting. Here again the playwright is choteando against a leader who is unable to govern in times of peace. The Major's background is not in civilian leadership, and he finds it impossible to lead the general population the same way in which he led his soldiers. The orderly, however, insists that leading civilians is the same as commanding soldiers:

Ordenanza. La gente no sabe lo que quiere. ¿Cómo van a saber los pueblos lo que les conviene? Los pueblos no piensan. ¡Es igual que en el ejército! El soldado no necesita pensar; para eso están sus superiores. Él, a obedecer. Si a los pueblos se les tratara igual que al ejército, todo marcharía. (131)

The argument that treating citizens the same as military soldiers could certainly constitute a critique of Cuban authority figures in Parrado's time. Although much of the overt changes in the Cuban leadership's attitude came after the writing of this play, Parrado appears to foreshadow the idea that the populace will be treated as soldiers, that is, expected to follow and obey the government without question. They are there to take orders and not to think for themselves; the government knows what is best for them and therefore there should be no deviation from what the leadership mandates. With this line, the orderly provides us with cultural choteo against such leadership mentality and mocks authority figures who follow this form of rationalization.

But the majority of the governing powers in this play come from a business background. They are more concerned about the *economic* impact of their decisions than the political and social ramifications. In fact, for some of the Ministers, these are not issues that they have even considered up to this point. Most surprisingly, the Minister of War admits to acting first and planning the rest later:

Mayor. ¿Creen ustedes que podremos mantener mucho tiempo esta actitud de amenaza a otros pueblos sin atacar o que nos ataquen?

Ministro de la Guerra. No hemos pensado en ello. Nos hemos lanzado sobre el mundo como si estuviéramos en paracaídas. Primero nos lanzamos, después medimos el terreno.

(137)

This image is decidedly short-sighted and shows the self-destructive nature of this form of governing. The exchange between the two men reflects the actions of the United States at the time of the play's writing, at least as it was perceived by Cuba. Choteo is used here to help Cubans recognize what they do *not* want for their own country. Nonetheless, it seems to foreshadow a bit what will happen to Cuba in the upcoming decades. While this is not something that Parrado could have known at the time she wrote the play, as the new regime had only been in power for a couple of years, there are, in later years, multiple instances of Cuban forces being sent to other nations to "free" them from oppressive powers.⁷⁸ Unlike the cases of the US soldiers, these revolutionaries were sent on specific missions and not simply stationed elsewhere,

⁷⁸ As previously mentioned some of these countries included Bolivia, Algeria, Ghana, Sudan, Tanzania, and Uganda. Further information on Cuba's military forces in Africa can be found in Frank Villafaña's book *Cold War in the Congo*.

but there was still a question as to whether their presence was necessary. In addition, Cuba had economic support from the Soviet Union during this time, a real-life factor that aided in preventing the issues described in this play. With the stimulus provided to them in 1960, Cuba was able to build factories and create additional jobs. This is an approach to improving the economy that is not considered in *La paz*.⁷⁹

Since it is clear that the leadership presented in *La paz* thinks of governing as merely another business transaction, they treat it as such. Such was not the case for Cuba – the treatment of the government as a profitable enterprise is a clear symptom of capitalist governments and as such mocks the authority that these so-called leaders may have. Even into the final scene of the play, we see the focus on business by the various Ministers:

El Mayor y su Consejo se reúnen. Inesperadamente, el país más pequeño declara la guerra. Algunas mujeres se reúnen frente al despacho del Mayor para pedir que no haya guerra. El Mayor observa desde la ventana.

Ministro de Economías. ¡Si la Bolsa sigue subiendo, explota!

Presidente de las Cámaras. A mí me gustan los negocios más tranquilos.

Ministro de Estado. La guerra es un negocio emocionante.

Ministro de Economías. ¿Qué está haciendo nuestro ejército?

⁷⁹ The economic agreement between Cuba and the Soviets was not limited to hard currency. As part of the deal, the Soviet Union would purchase nearly 4.5 million tons of sugar over five years, provide an economic stimulus loan to bolster the economy, and “supply Cuba with crude and refined petrol and a variety of other products, such as wheat, pig iron, rolled steel, aluminium, newsprint, Sulphur, caustic soda, and fertilizer... [and] Cuba would export fruit, juices, fibres, and hides to Russia” (Thomas 1266). There is no clear indication of whether the discussions leading up to this agreement included arms, but they were not a part of this particular financial arrangement.

Ministro de la Guerra. En este momento debe estar cogiendo sus armas para partir hacia el frente. ¡Al fin tenemos un frente de combate!

Ministro de Economías. Es un país pequeño, no podrá defenderse.

Ministro de la Guerra. ¡Mejor! Manejamos nosotros la situación.

Presidente de las Cámaras. ¿Y si nos manejan ellos a nosotros?

El Ministro de Economía lo mira con desprecio.

Mayor. No creo en enemigos pequeños. (142)

This interaction demonstrates that not only is the government intended to be run like a business for many of these leaders, but war is just a game that will improve the odds of victory. They do not take the time to consider the real-life impact of their actions. There is no choteo between characters here, but the sheer pleasure demonstrated by the ministers as they consider their plan to “win the game” and improve the economy shows what I consider cultural choteo between the playwright and the audience.

As the play draws to a close, it comes full circle (a dramaturgical structure quite common in Cuban theater of this era).⁸⁰ Just as in the beginning of the play, a loud bang is heard: “*Suena un disparo. Los ministros creen que es el champán. Entra el Ordenanza, pero en lugar de las copas trae el revólver en la mano. Todos se ponen en pie*” (144). It is apparent that the leaders have become complacent in their new roles. Whereas at the beginning of the play, they were all startled by the sound of the champagne bottle opening, here they do not even blink when the

⁸⁰ Other examples from throughout the twentieth century include *El flaco y el gordo* by Piñera, *La noche de los asesinos* by Triana, *Los siete contra Tebas* by Antón Arrufat, *La verdadera culpa de Juan Clemente Zenea* by Abilio Estévez, *Vagos rumores* by Abelardo Estorino, *Timeball* by Joel Cano, and *Réquiem por Yarini* by Carlos Felipe. The cyclical nature of life as shown in Cuban theater has been discussed by Beatriz Rizk in *Posmodernismo y teatro en América Latina: teorías y prácticas en el umbral del siglo XXI*.

sound is actually that of a weapon. When the game suddenly becomes real and the people rebel against the government, the leaders all go into hiding. This reaction is something with which Cubans could have potentially identified, as a similar fleeing of leadership had occurred in their country under previous governments.⁸¹ And while *La paz en el sombrero* as a whole could be considered a critique of the world's capitalist leaders, the final rebellion, as portrayed here, has never occurred in contemporary times in capitalist nations such as the United States. Such a rebellion had happened in Cuba, however. The people revolted against their government and the result was the Revolution. This ending is perhaps another reason why the play was never considered a critique against the Castro regime. Parrado makes it clear here that the people will win in the end, precisely the sort of theater of which the revolutionary government would approve. Although *La paz en el sombrero* may not have been considered a work with much choteo in it toward the Cuban system when it was written, it can perhaps be looked at as such with the distance of time. If future audiences or readers were to consider the play, they may recognize some of the consequences of these actions as those that had affected their own nation.

Camps points out that “en el caso de [Parrado], el proceso revolucionario que se inicia en 1959 le descubre nuevas perspectivas, nuevos horizontes, amplía y robustece su posición ideológica y política” (13). These new attitudes and viewpoints are evident in *La paz en el sombrero*, as it is a much more politically driven play than any of her previous work. It is clear that Parrado's writing had developed new qualities at this point, but that is not surprising given the political circumstances of her nation. And while her writing may have reflected a solidified political ideology on the whole, I argue that this is what strengthens her critical voice and her ability to integrate choteo throughout her text. Parrado's play critiques the capitalist nations of

⁸¹ Both Machado and Batista left Cuba under similar circumstances at the end of each of their dictatorships.

the world as well as the past, present, and (unbeknownst to its author) future political situations in Cuba.

Although there is minimal focus on women in this particular work, Gloria Parrado serves as an example of a female Cuban playwright who was able to successfully emerge out of a male-dominated field. As Andrade and Cramsie suggest, Parrado “ejemplifica la lucha de la mujer latina por salir adelante en su espacio social opresivo, y por ser pionera en Cuba de este género literario relativamente hostil a la mujer hasta años después y cuya producción es mencionada someramente por los expertos en este campo, a no ser que se trate de las dramaturgas ya ‘consagradas’ por la crítica” (63). Parrado is one of the few women who wrote during the early years of the Revolution, or at least one of the few to receive credit for her own individual writing. It was difficult for women to write works that would be staged during this time and for Parrado to have the opportunity to break through this oppression is crucial to understanding why and how she chose her topics. Parrado was not granted the luxury of writing about women. Her focus had to remain political and supportive of the Revolution in order to be recognized. Her choteo had to be directed at outside forces rather than toward the authority figures of her own country. This does not mean she did not believe in what she wrote, but rather that we will never know how intentionally critical she was toward her own government in this or other works simply due to her choice to write from *within* the revolution rather than *against* it.

La muerte del Ñeque: Choteo, Corruption, and Power

José Triana (1931-) was born in Camagüey, Cuba, and attended school in Manzanillo. He enrolled in the Universidad de Oriente in 1952 and the Universidad de Madrid in 1955, although he never officially finished his degree. After he returned to Cuba in 1959, he worked for the

telephone company before embarking on his writing career. In the 1960s he began writing and producing plays and collaborated on various magazines, newspapers and literary journals including *Ciclón*, *Lunes de Revolución*, and *La Gaceta de Cuba*, among others. He is probably best known for his 1965 play *La noche de los asesinos*. It was this work that brought him the greatest international acclaim as well as the highest opposition from the Cuban government. After winning the 1965 Casa de las Américas award, *La noche* was subsequently banned in Cuba. Rather than focus on this work, which has been studied in detail by many scholars,⁸² I will focus on the play he wrote immediately before, *La muerte del Ñeque*.⁸³

During the Batista regime, Triana lived in exile in Spain, and returned only after the triumph of the Castro-led Cuban Revolution. Diana Taylor claims that “as a person who had left Cuba as a persona non grata in 1955 under Batista, [Triana] considered himself profoundly revolutionary and wanted to deflect all political critiques of the play [*La noche de los asesinos*] as antirevolutionary” (197). In fact, looking at Triana’s own political history leading up to the early days of the revolution, it is difficult to argue that he was *against* the Revolution. And while Triana’s position did change over time, I agree that, in the first years of the Revolution, he was indeed supportive of the new system. Taylor states that “Triana participated actively in restructuring Cuba after the Revolution as a member of UNEAC [La Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba]. His critical inquiry into the nature of revolutionary roles and discourse does not necessarily indicate that he was experiencing personal disillusionment or crisis” (198). Here Taylor discusses *La noche*, written two years after *La muerte*, so if Triana was not disenchanted

⁸² Frank Dauster, Román de la Campa, Diana Taylor, Rosa Ileana Boudet, Ricardo Lobato Morchón, Ramiro Fernández-Fernández, Daniel Meyran, and Kristin Shoaf are among the many Cuban and Latin American theater scholars that have written about *La noche de los asesinos*.

⁸³ I have seen the title of this play presented in several ways: *La muerte del Ñeque*, *La muerte del ñeque*, *La muerte de Ñeque*, and *La muerte de ñeque*. Except in instances of direct quotations, I have chosen to use the form *La muerte del Ñeque* because that is how it is presented in the edition of the text that I reference.

by the revolutionary process in 1965, it is even less likely that such was the case when he wrote the earlier *La muerte*. Even if it can be argued that *La noche* is counterrevolutionary in one way or another, it is unlikely that *La muerte* would be regarded as such. As I discuss the choteo in *La muerte del Ñeque*, I will not consider it counterrevolutionary, even if it is critical of government in general.

Even after Triana's play, *La noche de los asesinos*, was censored by the Cuban government, he remained on the island until 1980, when he exiled himself to France. However, in a 2004 interview with Catalan theater scholar, playwright, and director Ricard Salvat, Triana describes what those early years of the Revolution were like for him and others like him. He confirms that there was a desire to create a theater movement on the island but admits that it was never fully realized because of revolutionary demands on the writers. Triana explains that an international theater center "...was our greater aspiration. It's very likely that listening to our conversations, our desires, and seeing a production of the National Guignol Theatre, you would come to that conclusion. But we did not meet our true potential. It was bogged down by fears, bureaucratic corruption, internal rivalries" (Salvat 99-100). It appears that, with hindsight, Triana recognizes the issues that prevented Cuban playwrights from reaching their full potential, and he admits that the writers themselves were a part of that problem. He tells Salvat that "as far as our position – that of the writers, artists and intellectuals who opted to remain – many of us saw the catastrophe coming. But we wanted to close our eyes and utter consoling phrases, hoping that things would be able to right themselves through a sleight of hand" (Salvat 101). Triana here appears to lament the fact that he and others like him did not take action at the time and that they instead buried their heads in the sand, hoping that the problems they faced would disappear. I contend that this strange condition, of being aware but feeling unable to take action, led to an

initial increase in choteo in the theater during the early 1960s. The drastic decrease and near disappearance of choteo in the following decades, at least in formally published theater on the island, was a consequence of Revolutionary censorship that arose from the government's response to these early choteo-laden works.

Triana, perhaps to an even greater extent than Piñera, made no secret of including elements of the absurd in his plays. In his interview with Salvat, he expresses the rationale for this approach to writing:

The absurd, the cruel, the surreal, the dreamlike or apparently formless qualities that appear in our plays are vague reflections that are readily transparent in daily Cuban life. Our roundabout way of saying things, our wild digressions, our ranting. A stridency and a sometimes undecipherable game of subtleties are constantly finding their way into our conversations and our behavior, at times to the point of creating absurd and cruel pandemonium. To try to express those characteristics is the task of a playwright or writer.

(108)

But this is more than just the absurd. This is a Cuban version of the absurd, and it undeniably incorporates choteo. By combining the anti-authoritarian choteo with the perceived “Western” theater of the absurd, the works of this period triggered reactions from authorities that led them to denounce the plays, and their authors, as counterrevolutionary. I argue that although these works may have included Western tendencies, they blended these tendencies so flawlessly with Cuban choteo that they created something altogether new. Kristin Shoaf, in her book *La evolución ideológica del teatro de José Triana*, contends that “lo fascinante del teatro del

absurdo es cómo comunica la angustia del autor por expresar las preocupaciones de la vida humana de una manera absurda” (7). When the playwright is able to blend this anguish with choteo, it creates a form of theater that is both concerned with, and critical of, the Cuban situation.

Shoaf goes on to explain that “Triana escribe para abrir la conciencia de la gente, para informarle de la realidad social y política cubana” (8). Choteo is not always required to inform, but when it is used in the theater, it often serves this purpose. Throughout this study, I argue that twentieth-century Cuban theater used choteo to expose spectators and readers to the realities of Cuban life and to encourage them to question their situation. In Triana’s case, as with many of the playwrights discussed in this study, he attempts to influence change through his writing, and not simply inform his audience about a particular situation; he challenges them to acknowledge their reality while simultaneously appealing to them to transform that reality. Triana uses the absurd to do this, but he also incorporates choteo as a humoristic approach at getting his audience to see what he wants them to see. In a published conversation involving Triana and various other Cuban playwrights, Virgilio Piñera explains that “Triana tiene un acierto muy grande, que para mí es un aporte al teatro cubano: me refiero a la escena del chisme; un elemento fundamental en la vida cubana es el chisme, y Triana lo hizo teatro” (Piñera, et. al., “El teatro actual” 97).⁸⁴ This chisme, or gossip, is often humorous in nature and, I propose, includes elements of choteo. Simply by including chisme in the play, Triana suggests to the audience that he does not take things too seriously.

⁸⁴ This comment comes from a transcription of a roundtable discussion with Piñera, Triana, Antón Arrufat, Abelardo Estorino, José Brene, and Nicolás Dorr. The date of this conversation is unknown from the issue I consulted at the Cuban Heritage Collection on 6 June 2015.

Triana's contributions to Cuban theater, therefore, are multifaceted, incorporating elements of the absurd, chisme, and, of course, choteo. He deals with cubanidad in his works and incorporates various methods to accomplish this. *La muerte del Ñeque* is no exception. Triana even states that, with this play, he took a deeper look at the Cuban reality of that time (Piñera, et. al., "El teatro actual" 100). This reality was not always simple and straightforward; it was complex and included various elements of Cuban daily life while simultaneously addressing issues of the past, something Triana was known to do often. Occasionally his inclusion of historical situations was either interpreted incorrectly (thought to be about the present), or caused the playwright to be dismissed by critics as only looking back and not looking forward as the Revolution demanded. The reality he appeared to consider was not the same one that the Revolution supported.

Boudet asserts that, "*La muerte de ñeque* (1963), tampoco fue muy favorecida por la crítica, que la estimó muy inferior a *Medea en el espejo*" (*Cuba: viaje al teatro* 122).⁸⁵ This negative assessment, combined with the fact that it was a lesser-known work by Triana, raised the question, why had *La muerte* been relegated to the shadows more than any other of his works from the revolutionary period? Was it simply not well written? Was its subject matter not universally appealing? Why was it not as successful as his other works? Frank Dauster writes, in his 1966 article "Cuban Drama Today," that

Of his own work [Triana] has said that its structure is too loose and disorganized, and that his primary interest lies in the oblique presentation of human conflicts. This is certainly

⁸⁵ In *Medea en el espejo*, written in 1959 and first staged in 1960, Triana takes the Greek tragedy *Medea*, by Euripides, and re-works it to analyze the Cuban reality of the time. It was a work that was also banned by the Castro regime for its allegedly incendiary nature.

true of *La muerte del ñeque*, which suffers from an overlong second act; at the same time, Triana's willingness to experiment produces occasional moments of real brilliance, as when he uses double levels of reality with great effectiveness in the same play. (163)

It is not uncommon for a writer to be critical of his own works, and perhaps the second act is a little drawn out, but I sought to find one of those "moments of real brilliance" in this work. And while this work may not live up to *La noche de los asesinos* as far as the critics are concerned, it is, in fact, a critical play.

Triana blends his critique with humor in *La muerte* and, in doing so, expresses moments of choteo. He admits that "me gusta siempre buscar una situación lo más enrevesada posible, y a partir de esa situación extraña o de ese pequeño cataclismo ir desarrollando la pieza hasta su consumación. Miro al hombre en su actitud crítica, en una posición clave, en el momento de las posibles transformaciones o de los posibles cataclismos" (Piñera, et. al., "El teatro actual" 100). But how does one keep an audience interested in watching a play that is reproachful of the people – the same types of people that could very well be in the audience? In Cuba, I would argue that this is most effectively achieved by incorporating choteo. And even though Triana is critical in *La muerte*, his use of choteo engages the audience. This humor brings yet another level of reality to the piece and makes it appropriate for Cuban audiences.

To analyze this play more closely, it is important to start with the title: *La muerte del Ñeque*. According to the Real Academia Española's *Diccionario de la lengua española*, the word *ñeque* has a variety of meanings. Among these meanings are the adjectives *fuerte* and *vigoroso*, as well as the verbs *fuerza*, *energía*, *valor*, and *coraje*. It is possible to interpret the title of this play keeping in mind these different definitions, although, with the exception of *fuerza* and

energía, which are labeled as Americanisms, these definitions are regional. However, the dictionary goes on to explain that ñeque has a unique colloquial use in Cuba – *mala suerte*.⁸⁶ José Escarpanter provides his own definition of ñeque: “palabra yoruba que significa desgracia y se aplica también a quién es víctima de ella” (37).⁸⁷ The question then arises, who or what is the “ñeque” in this play? Is it Hilario, the target of the members of the chorus and the one who ultimately dies at the end? Or is it death to the idea of bad luck now that the people have been liberated from Hilario’s oppressive control? And if it is the latter, are any of the characters truly free from bad luck at this point? These questions are the initial elements of choteo in the play. With the title of this play, one might question whether Triana is speaking about the death of the one who brings bad luck and disgrace, or about the death or end of the people’s suffering from bad luck and disgrace. The answer to this question is, quite possibly, both.

La muerte del Ñeque is a three-act play set during the 1950s in Santiago de Cuba. The first act opens with Pepe, Juan, and Ñico playing dice. They have been hired by Juvencio to kill Hilario. Apparently, Hilario had Juvencio’s father killed in order to rise to his position of power in the community. Juvencio’s revenge includes seducing Hilario’s wife, Blanca Estela (a former prostitute who was “won” by Hilario during a card game), and hiring these three assassins to eliminate his enemy. Throughout the play, the various characters appear to be searching for the truth while simultaneously keeping secrets from one another. During the first act, Cachita seems to fill the role of informant, providing the chorus, and the audience, with background information about Hilario. Her granddaughter, Berta, does the same with Pablo when she suggests to him that

⁸⁶ This definition is made more specific by the *Diccionario de cubanismos más usuales*, which provided the following definition in the 1978 edition of the book: “Ñeque: *Persona que trae mala suerte*” (250). Emphasis my own.

⁸⁷ This definition is based on Fernando Ortiz’s explanation of the word in his book *Los negros brujos*, 1903. The elaborate description found on pages 87-88 seems to be an exaggerated attempt at pinpointing the origin of this word.

his stepmother, Blanca Estela, may be having an affair with Juvencio. Even though he does not wish to believe what Berta has said, Pablo questions Blanca about this and she vehemently denies it. After Pablo leaves, however, Juvencio enters the scene and it is apparent that he and Blanca Estela are lovers. As they swear their devotion to one another, they disappear into the darkness just as the three chorus members relate the two lovers' affair through a game of pool. In the second act, the three chorus members continue to plot the death of their target, Hilario, while simultaneously recounting the night's events. Apparently, Hilario did not receive his promotion and was furious that there was a party planned for him. Tensions rise among the other characters as well as they confront one another about various truths, but Triana handles these situations by incorporating choteo to lighten the mood. Hilario eventually appears in the third act, which takes place the next day. He attempts to maintain his authority over those he encounters in this act, but it is clear that his deception and corruption will lead to his downfall. He no longer holds any control over his son or his wife. As he finally comes to recognize this, Pepe, Ñico, and Juan arrive to take his life.

The message of the collective group fighting to free itself from corruption is one that would be considered acceptable by the Cuban government of the 1960s and therefore the work was not and would have had no reason to be censored. But I contend that this collective protagonist is also corrupt to a certain extent. They fight to liberate themselves from a corrupt leader, but they use devious methods to achieve their freedom. Pepe, Juan, and Ñico, at the very least, are in it for the money. They continuously scheme for ways to get paid as much as they can from Juvencio. In the production notes at the beginning of the script, it is noted that Pepe is mulato, Juan is black, and Ñico is white, emphasizing that these three individuals are representative of the Cuban people. Ramiro Fernández-Fernández elaborates on this by adding

that *La muerte* “presenta la novedad de que el protagonista es colectivo. Se trata del pueblo, representado por el coro, en su lucha por destruir el mal, el cual aparece encarnado en el Ñeque, el esbirro de turno” (8). By presenting a chorus that represents the various races in Cuba, Triana effectively suggests that these three men *are* Cuba.

Frank Dauster states that these three “tienen... el doble papel de comentar la acción, al estilo del coro griego y de participar activamente en ella” (*Ensayos* 20). Although there are other instances of Cuban plays based on Greek tragedies and comedies, *La muerte* creates a chorus, names its members, and integrates them into the action. They not only tell the story, they live the story, and they are directly impacted by the actions of the others within the story. This is seen during the initial scene, in which they are joined by Cachita, an older black woman who is on close terms with Hilario’s son Pablo. She is the first character to use choteo. She starts off addressing Juan, Pepe, and Ñico, and then proceeds to direct the latter part of her statement directly to the audience, thereby interpellating them into the chorus:

Cachita. Habrá fiesta, y en grande, si se confirma la noticia. Su padre asciende, asciende... A mí me encantan esos bretes. (*Directamente al público.*) A lo mejor ustedes mismos se pueden colar y pasan un buen rato. (*La muerte* 20)

This particular choice of words is what creates the scene’s choteo. The word *brete* has a variety of meanings including, “shackle,” “predicament,” “screw,” and “lay” – the final two being sexual in nature. These last two also happen to be Caribbean slang terms that would be understood by the audience – the same audience being invited to join the party. Cachita’s sexual innuendo is apparent when combined with her comment about how Hilario “asciende,

asciende...” She shows little or no respect for her target (Hilario) and succeeds in degrading his authority to anyone who may have expected him to be a character worthy of respect.

This is only the first of the choteo in this interaction between the chorus and Cachita. When Ñico calls her an old lady, she is insulted. Pepe takes advantage of her reaction to focus his choteo on her:

Cachita. (*Ofendida.*) Qué falta de respeto. ¿A qué viene eso de vieja? Sesenta años no es nada. Al contrario, todavía me queda mucho por delante y seguiré dando guerra.

Pepe. (*En tono de burla.*) Vaya, vieja, vaya... Usted es igualita a esta casa: el día menos pensado se derrumba. (*La muerte 21*)

Here, Pepe informs Cachita that he does not take her, or the things she says, seriously. She is no more of an authority figure to him than his two comrades, and perhaps even less so. This is a minor instance of choteo between characters and does little to include the audience except to give them a target of laughter. However, the house that Pepe refers to here is Hilario’s, and, as such, his comment simultaneously foreshadows the changes that will come after Hilario falls. The use of choteo therefore highlights another voice critical of an authority figure. It also serves as a response against nepotism and corruption. The fall of Hilario’s house also means that his son will not rise to power either. Our “Greek chorus” here, representing the Cuban people, is fed up with the systemic corruption of those in power, and even mentioning the falling of the house is symbolic of the desire to see the downfall of Hilario himself.

Shortly thereafter, there is discussion about what type of man Hilario is and Cachita shows both sides of his personality when she explains,

Cachita. (*En tono de soliloquio.*) A mí, en lo que me toca, no tengo ninguna queja.

Connigo se ha portado de lo mejor. (*Satisfecha, sonriente.*) Es un bárbaro. Lo que yo le he visto hacer. La gente dice y repite y habla hasta por los codos, pero nadie dirá nunca la clase de hombre que es. (*La muerte 23*)

Cachita's first sentence is a reflection of what she believes she is expected to say about Hilario. This statement is what Cachita wants others to hear and to believe that she really thinks because if this conversation were to get back to Hilario, she would wish to remain in his good graces. However, what she says after she smiles reflects her true opinion of the man. Her satisfied smile after her brief soliloquy indicates the choteo in this scene. Triana does not specify, but I interpret the second half of Cachita's statement as delivered in a completely different tone than the first. There would be more venom in her voice and although she may not recognize her words as choteo, it is likely the audience would interpret them as such due to the already established reputation of Hilario.

Very little choteo returns again in the first act until the last three pages. The stage directions tell us simply, "La escena siguiente debe dar la sensación de que los tres personajes están observando un acto sexual" (*La muerte 56*). This "sexual act" takes place between Blanca Estela and Juvencio. The interaction between the two lovers occurs primarily "en la sombra," but it is quite evident what is happening based on the words of the three assassins. The three men play pool while the two lovers are off in the shadows. As the chorus describes the moves they make in the game, the audience can clearly apply what is being said to the alleged actions of the two lovers.

Blanca Estela y Juvencio van quedando en la sombra.

Blanca. Júramelo.

Juvencio. ¿Cómo quieres que te lo jure? (*Desaparecen.*)

Pepe. Por aquí.

Ñico. Suave.

Pepe. Por acá.

Ñico. Suave.

Pepe. A finca, dale duro.

Juan. No lo pienses.

Pepe. En el centro, en el centro.

Juan. Un golpe y nada más.

Pepe. Métela.

Ñico. Suave.

Pepe. Rápido.

Juan. (*En un grito.*) Carambola.

Pepe. Eres un paquete, mi socio.

Blanca. (*Gritando desde dentro.*) Al fin podré respirar en paz.

Cae el telón. (La muerte 57-59)

This exchange is a form of visual choteo that plays with the audience's understanding of the interaction between the two lovers without showing these actions. Dauster describes the final moments of the first act, stating:

Al terminar el primer acto, vuelve Triana a manejar el juego, con gran éxito. Contemplan los tres futuros asesinos una escena erótica entre Juvencio y Blanca Estela. Salen éstos para culminar el acto, y los tres malevos comienzan un partido imaginario de billar; exaltan el simbolismo erótico de los instrumentos del juego, la rápida acción rítmica y el vocabulario sugestivo. (*Ensayos* 23)

This scene not only provides choteo through the characters, as the chorus mocks the two lovers, it is also choteo on the part of the playwright. Triana too is playing a game with the audience; his characters describe the exploits of the two lovers without having to show the act on stage. If their sex scene had been openly performed (something most certainly out of the question at this time), there would be nothing more to it. The way in which Triana plays with the words of the chorus and the actions of the lovers is choteo against the censors. Since choteo can be considered a descendant of the picaresque, a sort of sexual choteo would be quite fitting here. As Hidalgo explains, “El choteo tiende, pues, a ridiculizar, a poner en tela de juicio, la importancia de lo que se habla, y se convierte en una voz solapada de resistencia que, en muchos casos, se contrapone al discurso de poder” (*Irreverencia y humor* 67). The question becomes then, which discourse of power does this scene oppose? I argue that it disputes censorship on the stage in general. It is not that anyone would expect a sex scene on stage, but the fact that nothing can be seen between the two lovers, but everything can be understood, challenges the power and effectiveness of censorship.

The second act begins with Juan returning from an unnamed location with some unknown information. Pepe and Ñico go to great lengths to figure out what Juan is hiding from

them. The stage directions state that “Ñico le enseña a Pepe una botella de ron ‘Palmita’. Juan se queda instantáneamente deslumbrado. Pepe toma la botella y se la enseña a Juan. *El instante debe tener un halo mágico*. La botella representa una necesidad, por lo tanto, algo fascinante que Juan rechaza” (*La muerte* 65).⁸⁸ Here the choteo used is visual; the “halo mágico” around the bottle of rum says everything that remains unspoken. By focusing on the bottle, the audience understands that Pepe and Ñico are attempting to torment Juan with the promise of alcohol in exchange for his knowledge. In this particular instance it does not work. It is a failed attempt that Juan somehow, surprisingly, is able to resist. The following four pages of the script show the interaction between the three men. Juan wants to tell the other two what he knows but tries to refrain from sharing this information, as withholding what he knows puts him in a position of power over the other two. Pepe and Ñico act as though they do not actually want to know anything, which, in fact, is what finally convinces Juan to recount the following interaction between Hilario and his son Pablo:

Juan. Hilario no pudo recibirlo enseguida. (*Pausa. Pepe y Ñico están ansiosos por preguntar, pero contienen sus intenciones. Se miran uno al otro interrogantes.*) La orden de ascenso no llegó. En su lugar le echaron una vaina. (*La muerte* 69-70)

The pause that Juan takes before stating that Hilario did not get the promotion he sought, and in fact killed for, demonstrates how badly he wants a reaction out of the two other men. When they continue to act as though they are not astonished by this news, Juan decides to resume his story – and by this point he is ready to share every detail with them:

⁸⁸ Emphasis is my own.

Juan. (*Indiferente.*) Entonces, como es natural, se formó tremendo jelengue. Todo el mundo se le tiró encima a Hilario. Le cantaron las cuarenta. Le echaron la culpa de todo... Que si la desmoralización, que si la vigilancia, que si los ladrones, que si la zona de tolerancia, que si los cuatro muertos de la calle Padre Pico, que si el contrabando, que si el juego... (*En otro tono.*) Y el viejo Hilario, que es bueno y bueno, dio un escándalo que parecía que se acababa el mundo... Qué rollo, madre mía. (*Se ríe.*) (*La muerte 70*)

Juan's obvious enjoyment in recounting this tale to his comrades is, at least for him, choteo. Hilario is his primary target and victim, but so too are Pepe and Ñico. He has the power over them right now because he knows what they do not. He focuses his choteo on Hilario, a man that represents corruption in power as well as Cuba's class and cultural conflicts at that time – spectators can perhaps see their own experiences in this situation and support Juan's choteo in opposition to the discourse of power held by Hilario.

Later in the same act Cachita is speaking with her granddaughter, Berta, when Hilario's only son, Pablo, enters the scene. He apologizes for canceling his father's party, as he mistakenly believes this is what the two women are discussing:

Pablo. La fiesta... Papá no quiso de ninguna manera que se diera. Usted sabe cómo es él.

Cachita. (*Con sorna.*) Pobre Hilario.

Pablo. Cuando a él se le mete entre ceja y ceja una cosa, no da su brazo a torcer.

Cachita. (*Fingiendo, chistosa.*) Ay, si yo hubiera sabido, no me hubiera encasquetado este túnico. Es el único que tengo para dar un plante los domingos y los días de repiqueteo gordo. (*La muerte 77*)

Since Triana provides Cachita's tone here, the humor in her words is easily understood. But it is also evident that she has no respect for the situation at all. It is less a concern about the tunic and more a judgement of Hilario and the assumption that, because of his position of power, he can just change everyone's plans on a whim. She also has no respect for Pablo, but that is related to his treatment of Berta in the first act. In both cases she recognizes that these men believe themselves to be above everyone else for one reason or another, and she refuses to acknowledge their power over her, thereby negating it. After Berta leaves, Cachita berates Pablo for his actions and, in her anger, discloses what she knows about Juvencio and Berta Estela, his father's wife:

Cachita. (*Lanzando un exabrupto.*) Juvencio se pasó toda la tarde con Blanca Estela en el mismo cuarto de tu padre. Todo el mundo lo vio.

Pablo. (*Sin saber qué decir.*) Eso no es cierto.

Cachita. Ya no podrás ocultarlo. Todo el mundo lo anda gritando por ahí. ¿Qué me dices a eso? (*Cruel. Sonriéndose. Burlándose.*) Es una lástima. (*Aparte como si hablara con otra persona.*) Pobre muchacho, tan joven. La vida no ha sido justa con él. (*Como si continuara hablando con la otra persona, con una sonrisa.*) El niño quiere que lo deje. Pero no lo conseguirá. (*Violenta. A Pablo.*) Tendrá que oírme. Le diré todo lo que tengo que decirle. (86-87)

She proceeds to tell him the truth about Hilario, forcing Pablo to acknowledge that his father murdered Juvencio's father and has brought disgrace to their community. In order to consider this choteo, one must further examine this interaction, because, on the surface, Cachita's words are simply cruel. She retaliates for the manner in which Pablo treated Berta earlier in the play, while at the same time exposing him to the reality of who his father really is, something Pablo would prefer to continue denying. But choteo can be cruel, especially from the victim's perspective. Pablo's support of his father allies him with authority figures, and here Cachita criticizes the representative of the system, Pablo, for his naiveté regarding his father's actions, something of which the rest of the community is fully aware.

Despite the fact that there is no one else on the stage with her and Pablo, Cachita appears to speak to a third, imaginary, person rather than directing her words to Pablo himself – although of course, he can still hear everything as these lines are not written as an aside. Freud states that “a joke... often calls for three persons and its completion requires the participation of someone else in the mental process it starts” (222). So Cachita makes use of a third, albeit unseen, person to share in her choteo against Pablo. Interestingly, Triana does not state that she is speaking out to the audience, as he did earlier in the play. There is no one else on stage, so it is easy to assume that the receivers of the choteo are the spectators/readers since they are the only others present. Freud continues, explaining that a joke “may only make use of possible distortion in the unconscious through condensation and displacement up to the point at which it can be set straight by the third person's understanding” (222). So, our third person – the audience – will have to understand the humor in this situation. The question becomes then, do they find humor in this choteo, or is this simply perceived as cruelty directed at a naïve individual? Is this choteo with anyone, or is Cachita simply trying to create humor where it does not exist by including this

unknown third person in on the joke? It is not that this is not choteo, but rather that it is a failed attempt at choteo on Cachita's part. She mocks Pablo's *lack of authority* rather than his authority, and that is why it comes across as cruel, rather than amusing.

Clearly, not all choteo is successful in making the third person, or the audience in the case of the theater, laugh. If this were everyday choteo between two living individuals and not that between two characters in a play, one could easily assume it was a cruel and unsuccessful attempt by the choteador and move on. But since it is written choteo included in a literary work, it is essential to analyze these lines further. Dauster indicates that "el teatro de Triana tiene como eje lo irracional y lo incoherente humano, y la violencia que encuentra el autor en las raíces de la psicología cubana. Su obra es una profunda investigación de las realidades que yacen debajo de la aparente sociedad cotidiana" (*Ensayos* 9). The attack by Cachita is no different. Triana shows the violence in everyday life through this altercation. And although there is no physical violence, there is a psychological violence delivered through choteo. Triana chooses to incorporate choteo, a part of daily life in Cuba, into the everyday moments of the play, creating something recognizable for a Cuban audience, if only on a subconscious level.

Cachita is not the only woman who utilizes choteo to manipulate Pablo. Blanca Estela also employs this tactic in the following scene in which Pablo will eventually confront her about her encounter with Juvencio the previous day. She starts out playing the role of the caring (step)mother but quickly transitions into that of seductress after Pablo reminds her that he is not her son. She then recounts what she claims to be a dream in which Hilario is Pablo's age, and in fact he looks identical to his son now. She speaks about the struggle that they have to be together in her dream, because Hilario's father – who of course looks just like Hilario does now – prohibits their union. This recounting of her dream gets Pablo worked up (both emotionally and

sexually), and although he initially attempts to resist her advances, he momentarily gives in to his desires. When she then rejects him, he is temporarily taken aback by her actions, but quickly recovers and claims that he also had a dream – a dream in which “Juvencio estuvo metido en el cuarto de papá. Todo el mundo lo vio. Ese es el sueño” (*La muerte* 93). And despite the fact that Blanca Estela realizes she has been caught, she laughs, feigning innocence and claiming that Pablo is merely jealous of Juvencio. Her sexual games with Pablo demonstrate that she gives him absolutely no power of authority over her. She, and not Pablo, is in control. She intentionally humiliates him and demonstrates her lack of respect for him.

The third act finally introduces Hilario, presenting the man that the others have been describing for two acts. The scene is an interaction between Hilario, his son, and his wife in which Hilario does everything to exert his power over the other two. At one point, when Pablo attempts to justify his desire to move away, Hilario reacts angrily:

Hilario. (*Violento.*) No quiero saber nada. ¿Me oyes? Al diablo. (*Golpeándose el pecho. En un grito.*) Yo soy un tipo importante. (*Pausa. Sube hasta el final de la escalera. Con la voz entrecortada.*) Yo soy un tipo importante: que reconozcan mis méritos. Que el mundo se ponga de rodillas cuando pase Hilario García. (*La muerte* 106)

Rather than existing between characters, the choteo here comes directly from Triana as he critiques the supposed greatness of the man in power by demonstrating Hilario’s loss of control over the situation. His outburst in this moment shows that Hilario thinks more highly of himself than any other character in the play thinks of him. In the case of *La muerte*, I understand Triana’s criticism as one against those who abuse their power. Hilario represents those who take control,

at whatever cost, even if they have not properly earned that power. Hilario is reputed to have killed Juvencio's father in order to take his position of power on the police force. In this scene, the fear that he may lose any influence he has established is unmistakable. His words in this moment are an attempt to maintain his authority. This moment marks the beginning of the end for Hilario. He has obviously played a role in his own downfall, but he does not see that; rather, he sees only that others are trying to stop him from maintaining the control he believes that he deserves.

Throughout the play, but especially in the third act, Triana appears to be choteando with gender roles as well. In particular, the interactions between Blanca Estela and Hilario reveal some of the more stereotypical macho expectations for how wives ought to behave for their husbands:

Blanca. (*Mimosa.*) Es verdad lo que dijiste hace un momento: no sé darme mi lugar. No he aprendido a ser tu esposa. (*Hilario balbucea. En otro tono.*) Me reprochas con muchísima razón. No, no digas ni media palabra. (*En otro tono. Jugando mimosa.*) Bobito, más que bobito, bobote. (*En otro tono.*) Es una fatalidad. Nunca me pongo a pensar en los demás. Es el destino. Ya ves... Hago sandeces... Te prometo que me encerraré en esta casa para siempre, que no veré nunca más la luz del día, que seré para ti como una muerta vestida de negro.

Hilario. (*Balbuceando.*) No... No. Eso no.

Blanca. Sí, lo haré.

Hilario. (*Apasionado.*) Eres mi mujer. Mi mujer. Tienes que aprender. Tienes que acostumbrarte. (*La muerte 120*)

Hilario expects his wife to act a certain way, and as part of this performance for her husband, she insists that she will do this. However, given the various changes in tone throughout her lines, one can reasonably assume her intent is less than serious and that she ridicules Hilario's demands even as she appears to consent to them. In particular, when the stage directions state that she is "jugando mimosa" it is understood that these words are just part of the game for her. Perhaps she is choteando with Hilario here and he is simply not aware of it. Regardless, I argue that Triana, as the playwright who created these lines, is choteando with the audience regarding the expected behaviors and societal norms for Cuban women. Blanca Estela formerly ran her own brothel but now is expected to play the role of wife. Hilario insists that she can learn to play her new role and be the person he wishes her to be, but as she is not an object, nor a pet, she will not be forced to change her ways entirely. I interpret this moment in *La muerte* as one that plays with Hilario's expectations in order to demonstrate how women have much more facility over themselves than men in power would imagine them to have.

After this scene, choteo does not emerge again until the end of the play. Blanca Estela finally walks out on Hilario after their fight. The stage directions explain the style and tone of the music to be played as the three chorus members chant about what happened to Hilario:

Pausa Se oyen el toque de unas claves, luego las maracas y el bongó en un ritmo violento. Los tres personajes se vuelven hacia el público y avanzan hacia el primer plano sonrientes.

...

Coro. *(Los tres personajes. Cantando. Música de guaguancó).*

Yo no sé lo que pasó.

Yo no sé, yo no fui.

Yo no tengo la culpita.

Yo no sé, yo no fui.

Yo no fui, yo no sé.

Yo no sé lo que pasó.

Yo no sé, yo no fui.

Yo no fui, yo no sé.

Y ella se queda sola

porque el pájaro voló.

(Se repite en forma de malicioso estribillo.)

Telón. (128)

This song comes immediately after the three men, Juan, Pepe, and Ñico, have finally killed Hilario. Their denial of knowing what has happened is, on one level, a simple cover-up for their actions, but it exceeds mere denial. Throughout the play, the chorus symbolizes the Cuban people. They attempt to eliminate corruption by killing Hilario, but, along the way, they accept bribes and lie about their actions. Again, the choteo in this third act belongs completely to Triana's text and imagined staging, and not to the characters themselves. The textual commentary of the didascalia is related to an inability to escape the cycle of corruption – something Triana addresses in detail in *La noche de los asesinos*. He only begins to explore this subject in *La muerte*, but nonetheless the same concerns are present in this ending scene.

The fact that *La muerte del Ñeque* received less than favorable reviews is not overly surprising if one considers Cuba's political situation at the time. Shoaf stresses:

La muerte de Ñeque, como El Mayor General, Medea, y El Parque, trata del pasado nacional cubano, durante la época de Batista. El Ñeque aquí puede ser Batista, con su poder autoritario y actitud opresiva... Triana propone que mediante el examen del pasado se puede mejor entender lo que es la esencia de ser cubano desde la independencia hasta el presente. En este drama, el coro asesina al Ñeque, pero como se verá en La noche de los asesinos, matar no significa necesariamente la libertad del pasado. (68)

While Triana does provide an examination of the past in both *La muerte* and *La noche*, I suggest that he also looks to the present to reflect on what has changed and what has not. As Shoaf proposes, el Ñeque could very well be Batista, and the chorus could embody the Cuban population, but then that makes Juvencio a representation of Castro. *La muerte* demonstrates that the cycle of corruption in power continues even after the oppressor has been eliminated, and thus Triana indicates that Castro is little different from his predecessor. Though the play is blatantly critical of the Batista regime, it simultaneously questions the effectiveness of the revolutionary government. The cyclical nature of the system used to rise to power has not changed. The specific leader may be different but the situation remains the same.

In a 1995 interview with Barbara Rivero, Cuban theater actor and director Vicente Revuelta explains his interpretation of the message behind *La noche*: “siempre la entendí como un texto cuyos recursos fundamentales son la ironía y el choteo, sobre la gente que se pasa la vida tratando de cambiar, de hacer la Revolución, pero sentados en un café, sin hacer nada”

(“Jerarquizar la calidad” 100). Although Revuelta refers to Triana’s later play, the interpretation applies to *La muerte* as well. The earlier play is loaded with irony and choteo, albeit perhaps to a subtler degree than in *La noche*. Both works also deal with the fear of unavoidable repetition. While *La noche* shows three characters acting out the repetition through rehearsal time and again, the consequences of repetition in *La muerte* remain hidden. In fact, this unseen future in *La muerte* can be interpreted as a complete change in leadership and the rebellion of the people against the corrupt leader, but the corruption motivating that shift in power should not be ignored. Triana is critical of the political situation; he understands the history of Cuba quite well and fears the repetition of past mistakes. He does not speak out about a failure of the Revolution in either of these plays, but he does question how the new political situation will differ from those that came before. As Dauster claims:

No es Triana crítico social en el sentido aceptado de la palabra. No hay, en su presentación obsesiva del mito de la violencia y lo irracional en la vida cubana, acercamiento directo a problemas de índole social, económica o política. Lo que critica es el estancamiento que condujo a la necesidad de una revolución, la religiosidad ciega, la corrupción política y la decadencia de la familia. (*Ensayos* 25)

I question this claim by suggesting that although what Dauster argues regarding the focus of the playwright’s critical approach is valid, Triana’s works are in fact both social and political. How can one critique political corruption without approaching problems of a social nature? Perhaps Triana’s subtle approach is not direct enough and therefore not as effective as it could have been, but the critique is still present in this work.

In many cases choteo can take the form of a game, and, in the case of *La muerte*, the game is billiards. Dauster reminds us that “repetidamente, se refieren los personajes a sus acciones y sus palabras como juegos, y juegos específicos se emplean como versión metafórica del asesinato y del acto sexual” (*Ensayos* 25). And while this commentary is directly related to *La noche*, it is also applicable to *La muerte*. This form of metaphor is seen with Blanca Estela and Juvencio as well as with the chorus members as they plot to kill Hilario. But playing billiards is more than just a game symbolic of sex and violence. Shoaf reveals that “*La muerte de Ñeque* evoca el aparato de una tragedia griega: tres criminales, un negro, un mestizo y un blanco, quienes matan a su jefe criminal. El juego de billar en este drama representa las fuerzas mitológicas del destino y la fortuna” (3). Triana takes the basic concept of a Greek tragedy and renders it uniquely Cuban. The use of choteo is one element that contributes to *La muerte*’s cubanidad. The modern setting and the specifically Cuban slang play major roles here, but it is Triana’s ability to blend language and setting together with choteo in a way that makes the work strictly Cuban.

Conclusion: Choteo and Revolution or Revolution?

Whether the plays analyzed in this chapter were approved and sanctioned by the Cuban government, shut down, discredited, or completely ignored, choteo was still a major component and played a role in their success both in print and on stage. Whether choteo was blatantly, covertly, or questionably against the playwrights’ own government, that of previous Cuban regimes, or even toward external governments, it was still present. Although choteo during this period is most certainly politically driven in one way or another, it is necessary to recognize that it cannot be separated from the social and economic situations in which Cubans found

themselves at the time. Theater written within the first five years of the new regime reveals a variety of responses to authority figures. Some supported the new regime, while others questioned or doubted what the future would bring. But each of the works studied here demonstrates a recognition that placing complete trust in any one leader was something that could, and should, be questioned.

Within a few months of the arrival of Castro, Rine Leal writes that “el momento está maduro para la entrada de la clase obrera en el teatro moderno, por la misma razón de que los obreros están ya maduros para lanzarse a la lucha de clases” (“La clase obrera en el teatro” 14). And even if what Leal argues for may well be the collective theater form that would soon dominate the island, he discusses Cuban playwrights bringing their own ideological reality to their works. Leal acknowledges that these perspectives may have previously existed in other works, but that their role in the drama was often secondary. Here he explains that ideology must be the mission and that Cuban theater must move away from the bourgeois theater traditions it had inherited from Spain. Considering the previous chapter of this study, I argue that Cuban theater had already taken steps to do so, but the changes are considerably more apparent from this decade onward. However, not all ideological stances were acceptable to the Cuban government and certain approaches to the theater were rejected shortly thereafter.

Only a year after the new regime came to power, in his article “Teatro 1959,” dated January 18, 1960, Cuban playwright Antón Arrufat alludes to the already looming discussions around indoctrination and the theater. He reveals how the revolutionary government “se habló de adoctrinar a los dramaturgos en las leyes revolucionarias para que en sus obras las defendieran y explicaran al pueblo. La eficacia de este predicamento radica en que el teatro es de los géneros literarios el que más influye sobre las conciencias. Es decir, que se escribiera un teatro de tesis

política y social” (14). However, Arrufat questions making theater solely about the Revolution, because, he argues, doing so would not, in fact, be revolutionary. He believes that “todas estas nobles sugerencias a los escritores, estas bellas teorías son en el fondo una limitación encubierta” (14). Arrufat’s assessment came even before Castro’s 1961 “Palabras a los intelectuales.” While the Revolution provided the Cuban people with many opportunities, it also came with many limitations. The ability to write about whatever one desired was restricted and those who wrote “contra la Revolución” were forced either to stop writing (or at least publishing), or to leave the country. It is understandable then why Parrado might have chosen to write “dentro de la Revolución” even if she may have been critiquing it as well.

Just a few years after these plays were written, notes Triana, “entre el 14 y el 20 de diciembre de 1967, con el Primer Seminario Nacional de Teatro se dictan las pautas a seguir. Se catequiza y exige qué teatro hacer, cómo hacerlo y para quién hacerlo” (Triana *El tiempo* xiv). This mandate, along with the words of Castro in his 1961 speech, greatly curtailed what theater would be allowed to do on the island during these first decades of the revolutionary government. This was a major turning point for Cuban theater and playwrights of this era. And while the three plays discussed in this chapter were all written prior to this command, it is interesting to consider the topics their authors thought that they could address prior to this decree. Triana wrote his piece after Castro’s speech, but it is possible that it (and, even more so, *La noche*) may have influenced the so-called need for a mandate from the Primer Seminario Nacional de Teatro. What was written prior to this mandate challenged the revolutionary government and as such it was shut down. In *Special Report: “Chistes” Political Humor in Cuba*, Luis E. Aguilar notes that “humor... is a serious affair. This explains why dictators rarely tolerate political jokes. They understand that power is no match for ridicule, and they fear the challenge of a joke” (i).

Parrado's jokes were geared ostensibly toward external governments and thus her humor was accepted; Piñera and Triana, on the other hand, used choteo in a manner which caused the Cuban government to question their political loyalties. The government felt itself the target of the playwrights' humor and as a result prohibited the authors from publishing and producing within the country causing a form of internal exile for many writers, and eventually leading to the external exile of some such as Triana.

But, as Aguilar indicates, "censorship does not destroy humor, it only drives it underground. For repressed people, it is a subtle form of rebellion; a collective means to pay back the oppressor; the last resort; the last laugh" (i). While the 1970s and 80s produced little theater written (or, at least, published) on the island that involved choteo, there is a dramatic increase in the humor seen in the theater of the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union. The lack of published works with choteo in them does not suggest that there were not attempts to include this humor during these earlier decades, only that they were less successful in making their way to the stage at that time. As the next chapter will show, choteo in the theater of the 1990s would also be political in nature, but, with the implementation of the Special Period, the focus would be more on the economic situation of the people than on the manner in which authorities would govern overall.

Chapter 3: What Happens Next? Economic Choteo and the Special Period

Bajo la extraordinaria presión económica que dentro del llamado ‘periodo especial’ vive el país por un lado –cortadas sus vías tradicionales de financiamiento y suministro– y por otro, el boqueo [sic] imperialista cada vez más asfixiante, todo el país, la cultura y dentro de ella el movimiento teatral y danzario, pugnan por continuar su desarrollo. (Quincoes 19)

The arrival of the 1990s brought with it a new problem for Cubans living on the island. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc the previous year, Cuba was faced with an economic crisis. The country no longer had the financial backing of a super-power nation behind it. This loss of support from the Soviets, combined with the ongoing embargo set in place by the United States in 1962, established immense economic pressure on Cuba. In *Cuba después del derrumbe del comunismo*, Giulio Girardi describes Cuba’s financial dependency on other nations after the fall of communism, explaining, “la reestructuración de la economía nacional acabó entonces por sustituir la antigua dependencia de Estados Unidos con una nueva dependencia, económica y tecnológica, y por consiguiente, en alguna medida, política e ideológica, del campo socialista y sobre todo de la Unión Soviética” (66). When this arrangement came to a halt after the fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba was left to figure out how to depend on itself.

Thus began what was dubbed as “El periodo especial en tiempos de paz.” This “Special Period in Times of Peace” brought with it many social, political, and economic changes. The economy in Cuba declined sharply after the collapse of the socialist bloc in 1989, and, as a result, Cuba entered into this “Special Period,” which implemented a kind of wartime austerity even

though the country was not at war. Without the Soviet Union to help support the Cuban economy, few major trade partners remained for Cuba. Without the ability to produce certain goods themselves, or to trade what goods they had with those of other countries, the Cuban government asked its people to accept reductions in rations and pay in order to survive the economic instability. While the standard of living for the Cuban people in the first three decades of the Revolutionary government is certainly debatable, it is clear that this new turmoil greatly affected them. Many Cubans needed to find a way in which to cope with this new situation. Julio García Luis explains that “[s]pecial period’ policies included more than just the economic sphere. They were based, above all, on a broader, more creative and dynamic approach to political and ideological work – especially the capacity for self-sacrifice and commitment by the workers and the people as a whole. They were founded on the honor, patriotism, fighting spirit and socialist consciousness of the masses” (318). What is found in many theater texts from this time-period is a struggle between this fighting spirit and the resignation toward the situation. There is often a contrast between characters who believe that this fighting spirit was best maintained through revolutionary acts and deeds, and those who believe that changes are essential in moving forward.

As Peter McGraw suggests, “Humor and coping, after all, seem to go hand in hand. Successful humor inspires all sorts of positive feelings and emotions, which can act as a psychological buffer when things go wrong” (189). Choteo in the theater saw a resurgence in the 1990s and was used to serve as this aforementioned “buffer” for and by the Cuban people during the Special Period. As Narciso Hidalgo points out, “No obstante, es preciso entender que el choteo cubano, que durante la República se basaba en directrices populares alimentadas siempre por el quehacer social y político, desapareció [en los 70 y 80]” (*Choteo: Irreverencia y humor* 98).

This lack of choteo in the more public sphere was often due to Revolutionary censoring. The government in general was overly cognizant of criticism, and since choteo is so often anti-authoritarian in nature, it is logical that publicly expressing a negative critique of the government would be discouraged. This does not mean that choteo disappeared, simply that it was not abundant in published literature or the arts. A more casual form of choteo between individuals still existed, and even choteo against the government continued to exist, but now people were much more cautious about with whom they shared their opinions, as many individuals served as a sort of neighborhood watch for the government (Prizant 86).

While the plays studied in this chapter appear to have been censored at one point or another for various reasons, it paradoxically appears that the Special Period allowed for writers and artists to open up, albeit slightly, in regards to expressing choteo in their works. During the moments of transformation discussed throughout this dissertation, I have seen a notable increase in the use of choteo in the theater. The Special Period was no exception. Each of the works discussed in this chapter approaches the economic precarity of the early 1990s with critical choteo. While the humor varies to a certain degree from play to play, I argue that choteo in these three texts is present between the text and the audience as well as between characters.

This chapter focuses on the function of choteo during Cuba's Special Period by looking at three specific plays written in 1993 and 1994: *Manteca* by Alberto Pedro Torriente, *Laberinto del lobo* by Miguel Terry, and *Vereda tropical* by Joaquín Miguel Cuartas Rodríguez. With each work, I consider how the economic situation in Cuba during the Special Period influenced changes in ideology, lifestyle, and political loyalty to argue that the use of choteo by these three playwrights demonstrates the resignation of the general population at this time. With *Manteca*, I analyze the three siblings to consider how choteo questions an unwavering socialist ideology. In

Laberinto del lobo, I look at the chosen lifestyles of the three characters and examine how choteo is used to critique the situations that drive the characters to behave as they do. And finally, with *Vereda tropical*, I focus on how choteo indicates shifts in revolutionary loyalty. The struggle to determine what it means to be Cuban is apparent in each of these plays. In some instances, characters believe that the Revolutionary spirit and revolutionary living are the best indicators of what it means to be a Cuban in Cuba, while other characters seem to resign themselves to their situations and acknowledge that the struggle is part of their identity. Others still believe that it is important to move away from what had previously determined Cuban identity and, as such, accept the need, or even seek, to change with the times. What seems to be called into question in each of these plays is the connection between Cuban identity and the Revolution that had been so prevalent in the first three decades under Castro.

By combining the need to cope with the economic situation on the island and the desire to convey Cuban identity, Magaly Muguercia explains that “el teatro en Cuba, como en toda la América Latina, busca modos nuevos y más dinámicos y penetrantes de expresar nuestra identidad y superar una crisis de valores” (“Del teatro sociológico” 17). She emphasizes that many playwrights “están obsesionadas con el estudio de nuestro ‘argot’ gestual, con los secretos del ritmo y el humor cubano, con los efectos de los cruces de cultura propios a nuestro sustrato mestizo” (15). Choteo has proven to be an effective and unique tool for achieving this expression of identity while simultaneously remaining critical of the Cuban situation.

Censorship of the theater was not uncommon during the early decades of the Revolution and it continued to exist into the 1990s. How then did Cuban playwrights successfully bring critical works to the stage? While there is record of only one performance of *El laberinto de lobos* and none of *Vereda tropical* on the island, *Manteca* had a long and seemingly successful

run, although it too faced its share of censorship issues. As each of these works is inherently critical of the economic situation in Cuba, it is not surprising that performances were suppressed. Yael Prizant reveals that “in Cuba, the hidden transcript has become a necessary part of the artistic sponsorship game, not simply a reaction to it. Subsumed and variable meanings are a vital part of the aesthetics of postrevolutionary arts in Cuba” (24).⁸⁹ It was, I argue, these hidden transcripts that allowed the works to reach public view at all. Choteo is a common element of a hidden transcript because, at face value, it creates a work that is humorous and appealing to many. And even if choteo is not always successful in finding a balance between the hidden transcript and its transparent message, it is this balance between the two that allows for the clear relaying of meaning. In fact, as Prizant continues, “Little on Cuban stages is entirely straightforward – theater artists employ metaphors, euphemisms, hearsay, slang, folklore, specific gestures, sarcasm, or a unique mixture of these techniques to veil their criticisms” (24). In addition to these techniques, choteo is another tool used to disguise opposition. It frequently overlaps with the elements that Prizant mentions in allowing for an anti-authoritarian approach to the performances and texts.

Vereda tropical is largely unknown, and *Laberinto de lobos* has not been examined in great detail, but *Manteca* is arguably one of the most studied Cuban plays from the 1990s. Writing subversive theater, whether with choteo or not, is risky. Prizant continues her explanation of the hidden transcripts in Cuban theater by adding that “although the consequences for doing so may be severe, artists in Cuba dare to transgress, to question, and to reconstitute their experiences in ways that often diverge from the official versions promulgated by the state”

⁸⁹ “Hidden transcripts,” a term coined by James C. Scott in *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* refers to “discourse that takes place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by powerholders.” He further explains that “the hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript (4-5).

(24). One of the many ways in which they are able to do this is through humor. As a subversive humor, choteo questions specific attitudes, behaviors, and actions and, as such, the resurgence of its use during the 1990s is not surprising. Choteo can effectively demonstrate discontent and frustration with a situation and, in particular, with authority figures and the government. Its use is a logical consequence of social, political, economic, and cultural factors, and this is apparent in each of the plays analyzed in this chapter. While it is impossible to consider any one of these factors without taking the others into account, this chapter focuses primarily on choteo that targets the Cuban economic situation of the 1990s. Though Cuban people living on the island during the Special Period faced many adversities, they also demonstrated resiliency, and their strength and determination are reflected in the various characters of these three plays. Despite a certain sadness to the characters' situations, the inclusion of choteo in these plays provides a balance to audiences and readers who may be able to relate, at least to a certain degree, to the stories. Muguercia states that “desde que se inició la presente década [de los 90], la sociedad cubana vive sometida a una situación de crisis extrema y asombrosa resistencia” (*Teatro y utopía* 9). This combination of crisis and resilience is not unique to Cuba, as many nations undergoing extreme crises are also very resilient, and even the use of humor during difficult times is not unique to the island.⁹⁰ However, choteo as a form of resilience during this specific economic situation in Cuba allowed for a non-confrontational form of resistance when overt defiance was prohibited.

Henri Bergson believed that “laughter has no greater foe than emotion” (4), and this idea connects with the resignation inherent in choteo, a humor that, without a doubt, conceals emotion behind words and actions. However, with choteo, the intended emotions do not become apparent

⁹⁰ McGraw discusses the use of humor as a coping mechanism in places such as Tanzania, North Korea, and Palestine, in his book *The Humor Code*.

until after the fact; that is, when (and if) the spectator or reader takes time to reflect on the experience. Such reflection can evoke sadness, anger, or frustration, depending on the context. In each of these plays, the characters struggle as they debate with themselves and each other regarding the best path for their futures. In order not to cry, they must laugh, or, at the very least, their audiences and readers must laugh. These three playwrights use choteo to create situations that carefully negotiate the line between tragedy and comedy. While choteo is expected to elicit laughter, it is also a coping mechanism for difficult situations, and, in recent history, there has been no situation more difficult in Cuba than that experienced by Cubans during the Special Period. As Graziella Pogolotti explains, “En las difíciles circunstancias que vive Cuba, el teatro es un espacio para el debate de ideas, convoca una reflexión, incita a un necesario proceso de autorreconocimiento. Persigue la imagen de una identidad siempre abierta a la reformulación y al enriquecimiento” (26). This is a huge responsibility, but one that Torriente, Terry, and Cuartas Rodríguez successfully carry in their plays. Cuban identity is clear in each, and though the degree of humor varies from one play to the next, choteo’s presence allows the spectator or reader both to avoid and, perhaps, to confront the emotions conjured by the texts.

As Cuban actor and director Vicente Revuelta states in a 1995 interview with Bárbara Rivero, “[N]osotros somos muy alegres, somos un país donde la gente se burla de cualquier cosa, pero no quiere decir que seamos tontos o irresponsables” (100). Cuban mockery extends to serious subjects as well. However, as Revuelta implies, Cubans understand the difference between complete irreverence and laughter while recognizing the underlying issues being addressed. This ties into Hidalgo’s definition of choteo (“joda-con-rigor”) as one in which the choteador would “chotear con rigor intelectual o artístico, sin perder el sentido crítico del humor” (77). Hidalgo’s interpretation of the humor, together with my position that the theater is

capable of engendering new ideas, suggests that choteo is a potentially powerful tool of the theater that can initiate change. Again, the success of any change is not always clear or easy to determine, but the potential is there. Torriente claims that “el teatro tiene la virtud de hacer pensar, razonar, que la gente se vea a sí misma, algo que generalmente no se hace” (“El teatro es una conspiración” 10). I agree with the playwright, although, whether or not people take action on those thoughts is another thing, but it does, at the very least, incite the individual reader/spectator to think.

Manteca: Choteo, Choices, and Consequences

Playwright and theater director Alberto Pedro Torriente (1954-2005) was born in Cuba and resided on the island until his death. In 1987 he, along with his wife Miriam Lezcano, founded the theater group Teatro Mío. In addition to *Manteca* (1993), he also wrote *Weekend en Bahía* (1987), *Desamparados* (1991), and *Delirios* (1994). In a 1994 interview with Vivian Martínez Tabares, Torriente describes how he looked for universal themes in classic stories and then applied them to his period-based pieces (“El teatro es una conspiración” 8). He strove to ensure that his writing could withstand the test of time while simultaneously addressing the situation of the daily lives of contemporary Cuba. He justified this two-pronged project by saying, “Siento una necesidad muy personal de debatir problemas con quienes me rodean. Creo que el teatro puede contribuir a que la gente mejore. A otros les puede parecer una tontería pero yo sigo aferrado a esas ideas” (“El teatro es una conspiración” 8). Addressing real-life problems and circumstances in the theater and blending them with humor such as choteo allows for a less heavy-handed delivery of messages that encourage change and, as Torriente suggested, allows people to improve themselves and their situations. In 1990s Cuba, this would involve

questioning the established revolutionary mandates around the economic circumstances on the island.

Manteca is a prime example of a play that uses choteo to counter the imposed national consciousness of the ruling class and creating an alternative national consciousness. The subversive nature of its characters, whether intentionally or not from the individual character's point of view, presents the audience with a different way to express what it means to be Cuban in the early 1990s. This alternative to the Special Period's governmentally prescribed mindset allows for the consideration that experiences outside of the imposed identity are, in fact, legitimate. Martínez Tabares adds, "*Manteca* focaliza también la defensa del destino de la nación cubana, como articulación inseparable y condición *sine qua non* para superar la crisis, desde la pertenencia y el compromiso, crítico y desgarrado de los hermanos, cada uno a su modo" ("Delirios habaneros" 14). The types of characters presented in this play, and the methods which they use to cope with their situation, are representative of Cubans themselves. Even if audience members do not recognize themselves in any of the play's three siblings, they will likely recognize the exaggerated behaviors of these characters. These caricatures work together with choteo in the play as a means of addressing the Cuban economic situation as a whole. Ultimately, this economic situation becomes yet another character in the play.

Manteca stands out a bit from the other plays in this chapter. While the others are virtually unknown in Cuba, *Manteca* is probably one of the most renowned plays of the 1990s.⁹¹ Although it was critical and, as such, controversial, *Manteca* had the longest continuous performance period of any of the plays that I analyze here. The play was initially censored,

⁹¹ According to Vivian Martínez Tabares in her book *Pensar el teatro en voz alta*, *Manteca* is "uno de los sucesos más significativos de la escena cubana en 1993" (58). However, I have been unable to locate information on audience size for each of its many performances.

presumably for its display of negative perspectives of the ongoing economic crisis and the impact of that crisis on the Cuban family, but was eventually performed more than fifty times by Teatro Mío at their own venue by the same name (Stevens 203, Manzor, et. al.).⁹² It continuously faced issues of potential censorship because, as Sarah J. Townsend recalls, “when it premiered in 1993, *Manteca* wasn’t a look back at a time of hardship and uncertainty; the play was written, rehearsed, and staged in the midst of the circumstances it represents” (303). *Manteca* was critical of the current situation in Cuba. Torriente did not hide behind the past as a way of representing the present, he addressed the issue of hunger and economic turmoil directly.

Manteca is a one-act play that tells the story of three adult siblings who have closed themselves inside their Havana apartment. They try to ignore the problems of the world around them by dreaming of a happy future. However, avoidance is impossible as they are forced to face their problems, namely the stench of the pig that they have been secretly raising for food in their bathtub. They must decide whether or not to kill the animal and what to do with it afterwards. The play is set on New Year’s Eve in the living room of a house where three siblings live. On this day that represents the possibility of new beginnings, Celestino, Dulce, and Pucho sit around the room and discuss the conditions of life in early 1990s Cuba. Celestino studies English verb forms as Dulce separates their weekly rice rations and Pucho is seen reading a draft of the novel he is writing. The three siblings are illegally raising a pig in their bathtub as a source of food and fat in scarce times. Pucho declares that they must kill the pig now because the smell has become intolerable in the apartment where they have shut themselves in with the animal. Dulce is opposed to killing the pig because she claims she has grown attached to it. As the three debate

⁹² In an endnote, Stevens considers that Torriente may have had more success than other playwrights in getting his play produced “because of his long involvement in revolutionary theater” (239). While she does not elaborate on this, she implies that, perhaps, some flexibility was allowed given his already established reputation in Cuban theater.

what to do, they also discuss the overall situation in Cuba: the problems that exist and the reasons that they are suffering. Dulce has some creative theories about their plight, and though he does not believe her, Pucho thinks that he will include some of her ideas in his novel. Celestino praises the former Soviet Union while at the same time lamenting that his wife left him to return there with their children. The siblings discuss many things throughout the play, but, in the end, the topic of conversation returns to the pig. In a moment of frustration, Celestino rises and leaves the room to kill the pig. After the long-anticipated act takes place, the siblings are not sure what to do. They have not envisioned this moment and are now forced to consider what to do with the pig. While they daydream about the possible options – having decided they cannot eat it – the blood of the animal runs out from the bathroom. At a loss for what to do next, the three siblings can only think about procuring another pig to replace the one that they have lost. The play ends with the three siblings imagining what their new animal will look like.

Taken at face value, the actions and behaviors of the three siblings seem rational, but, viewed in the context of the Special Period, Torriente is able to show the illogical moments of the situation through their seemingly logical actions. For example, it is logical that Dulce would divide the rice into portions for the week; however, it is illogical that these portions would be so small.⁹³ Indeed, spectators would have understood that this was hardly an exaggeration. They too had their rations reduced to next to nothing for many of the foods they received. Although it could be argued that some of the actions of the siblings are overly exaggerated, it is also apparent that there is enough reality in them to affect the audience. Muguercia contends that “el código de la narratividad propone inequívocamente al lector-espectador insertar sus asociaciones en el

⁹³ Torriente describes the packaging for this rice as *cartuchitas*, or tiny paper cones, which, although not explicitly stated, would likely hold mere tablespoons of rice. This form of packaging still exists for street vendors selling peanuts.

campo referencial de una historicidad concreta ('periodo especial', historia de la Revolución Cubana, derrumbamiento del campo socialista) que el texto insiste en relatar en términos literales o simbólicos" (16), thus suggesting that it is more than personal experience, but instead a shared experience that allows for this reality to impact the audience's perception of the play.

Choteo is often most successful when it negotiates the line between tragedy and comedy, between reality and exaggeration, between the benign and the violation. However, there still remains the question as to whether audiences would have found humor in this text. With historical distance, it is sometimes easier to process the humor in a story. In the case of *Manteca*, the play was staged in the midst of the crisis that is portrayed in the text. It is quite possible, using McGraw's benign violation theory,⁹⁴ that the violation would outweigh the benign in this situation. In fact, in his interview with Rivero, Revuelta describes his perspective on *Manteca* in the following words:

Es una buena obra y no sé si será la puesta en escena, pero me llamó mucho la atención que el público, no el de teatristas, estuviera muy serio, que no se riera, como si también estuvieran ante una obra polaca. Tú sabes que todo ese teatro negro de los polacos trata sobre la gente que tiene un gran problema en su vida con la nacionalidad y lo representan de una manera muy oscura, con *Manteca* yo recibí esa sensación. Creo que Alberto Pedro tiene humor, sin embargo la obra no resulta humorista, tal vez lo que le falta a la obra es que uno se ría mucho más. En la representación me llamó la atención la manera trágica

⁹⁴ McGraw's benign violation theory is described in detail in the introduction to this study, and is best summarized in his own words: "Humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign)" (10)

con que fue concebida, y esto se trasladó al público que asumió todo aquello con mucha seriedad, como un problema dramático. (100)

Revuelta admits that his perspective reflects the particular performance that he attended but notes that the audience did not appear to find the play humorous. If audiences perceived the subject matter of the play as too close to reality with not enough exaggeration, this could account for a failure to laugh at the intended humor. Connecting the attempts at choteo with the benign violation theory, perhaps the humor was too “wrong, unsettling or threatening” and not “okay, acceptable, or safe” enough to elicit laughter. However, Martínez Tabares suggests quite a different audience reaction, claiming, “there is a bold statement... on preoccupations and worries that are very close to a large portion of the audience, which responded to the performances with passion, heated applause, and raucous laughter” (“Manteca: Catharsis and Absurdity” 46).⁹⁵ This only serves to confirm that choteo is not always equally as humorous to some as it is to others.

Beginning with the title of the play, *Manteca*, there is choteo. Choteo often manifests through plays on words, and the multiple meanings of the word “*manteca*” should be taken into consideration here. First, and perhaps most obviously, manteca refers to lard, or pig fat, something directly referenced throughout the play as the three siblings debate whether or not to kill the pig that they have been secretly raising in their bathtub. Lard was a valuable product during the Special Period as it could be used for cooking, heating, and cleaning, and it replaces many products to which the siblings no longer have access. In Cuban slang, the word manteca can also refer to marijuana. In regards to this particular use of the word, Muguercia explains that

⁹⁵ In addition to Martínez Tabares’s article, see also Townsend’s introductory essay on the play in *Stages of Conflict*, Boudet’s “Prólogo” in *Morir del texto: Diez obras teatrales*, and Martínez Tabares’s *Pensar el teatro en voz alta*, for discussions about humor, the absurd, and word choice in *Manteca*.

“*Manteca*, en efecto, resulta una metáfora sobre la crisis de las utopías y el anhelo irrenunciable por una Vida Mejor. (La palabra ‘manteca’ en el argot cubano significa ‘marihuana’: sustancia productora de ‘paraísos’.)” (“El teatro cubano tras las utopías” 121). The world in which these three siblings live, and even more so the house to which they have confined themselves, is far from being a paradise. The implication of attaining a better life is already ironic; in connection with the pig, manteca enters the realm of choteo because its use is so far removed from this paradisiacal ideal. The final significance of manteca connects the play with Chano Pozo’s 1947 Afro-Cuban jazz hit by the same name.⁹⁶ The song plays nonstop throughout the performance, and there are multiple moments in which the volume increases and the audience is encouraged to focus on the song rather than the words of the characters.⁹⁷ Muguercia notes that “la presencia retadora de este elemento sonoro, que obstaculiza el fluir de los sucesos, parecería proponer, desde la estructura misma, la hipótesis de una *forma diferente de pensar el mundo*” (121).⁹⁸ This different way of thinking about the world can be conceived in a variety of moments throughout the action, but it is in the humorous elements where these differences are most clearly noted. Townsend suggests that “the song’s title was originally an allusion to marijuana, adding to the impression that whatever is going on in this apartment in the hours leading up to the New Year must be illicit” (301). Thus, yet another layer of choteo appears within the title of the play itself. Aside from the identical titles between the play and the song, the audience is left to contemplate which version of manteca is being referenced: is it simply the fat of the pig, or is it a focus on the

⁹⁶ “Manteca” was written by Chano Pozo and Dizzy Gillespie. It premiered at Carnegie Hall on September 29, 1947, and was recorded December 22, 1947. According to Gary Giddins, in *Visions of Jazz the First Century*, Gillespie had previously made attempts at creating a fusion between Afro-Cuban rhythms and jazz but it was “Manteca” that “had the requisite emotional and intellectual allure to successfully effect a Cuban American fusion” (288).

⁹⁷ See pages 55, 60, 62, 68, 73, 78, 84, 86, 92, 99, 100, and 108 in the version referenced here.

⁹⁸ Emphasis in the original.

unlawful activities taking place in the apartment? I argue that it is both. The fat itself is a crucial element of the story because it can be so useful to the siblings in many ways. It holds the promise of a better life, even if it is simply a better diet for a brief period of time. But it is also a reference to the illicit activity of raising the pig and the fact that this behavior is one that must be kept secret from neighbors and authorities. The title of the play alone evokes the choteo of daily life by asking audience members to question the meaning(s) of the word.

Each of the three characters represents a type within Cuban society, and each will be explored not only in how they exist as individuals but how they work together (or not) as a family unit.⁹⁹ The play takes place in the living room of the house that the three siblings share. This is not a tidy and orderly house; rather, it is described as having rusty tin cans, bags, and boxes throughout the room. The stage directions assert that the setting should imply that time has stopped for these three and the playing of “Manteca,” a song written decades earlier, aids in expressing this inability to move forward. The description of how the three characters are dressed (“*Pucho viste de payaso. Dulce lleva tacones, vestido de lamé y lentejuelas, pasados de moda. Celestino, overol mezclilla y botas altas*” [55]) also prepares the reader/viewer for the types that these characters will portray throughout the play: Pucho is the gay intellectual, Dulce is naïve and out of touch with reality, and Celestino is seemingly blindly devoted to the Revolution. By incorporating types that border on stereotypes, Torriente allows the reader/spectator to laugh freely without necessarily seeing themselves in the characters, even if they recognize the siblings’ behaviors.

⁹⁹ For more information on the importance of the family in Cuban theater at this time, see Camila Stevens’s *Family and Identity in Contemporary Cuban and Puerto Rican Drama*, specifically the chapter entitled “Ties That Bind Staging the New Family in Revolutionary Cuba.”

As with many of the plays considered in this study, the choteo is intended to be understood by the audience more than by the characters within the story. As Freud alleges, “[A] tendentious joke calls for three people; in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object... and a third in whom the joke’s aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled” (118). In the case of *Manteca*, the audience constitutes that third person. The object of the joke comes in the form of the types that these characters represent: the hardline communists, the simple-minded naïve individuals, or the intellectuals who have discovered that they have nowhere to go in life.¹⁰⁰ However, I suggest that the object or target could also be the authority figures who allowed these types to proliferate in Cuban society, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union, because it is clear that the characters in this play are critical of the world beyond their four walls. The precarity of the situation in which the siblings find themselves speaks to the precarity of the nation as a whole. The questions raised by the characters within this play and the circumstances in which they live, exist primarily because of the economic situation in Special Period Cuba, and therefore can be considered a criticism of the state of affairs in the country, albeit one undertaken with humor.

As the three characters sit around their living room discussing how they will bring themselves to slaughter the pig they have been raising in their bathtub, they also question the circumstances that have led them to this point. Dulce, seen as naïve, makes a suggestion as to the root cause of their (and Cuba’s) problems:

¹⁰⁰ According to Sarah J. Townsend, the three characters “evoke well-known ‘types’ in Cuban society, much like nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century *costumbrista* plays that reflected local customs and created “representative” portraits of Latin America’s fledgling nations” (302). While these new types are reflective of the contemporary situation, they would be well-known to audiences at that time. This incorporation of types would make the characters relatable or at the very least, identifiable by audiences. Character types work well within choteo as they allow for the audience to better understand the message of the joke.

Dulce. Nunca tuvimos dinosaurios, ese es el problema. Así es la naturaleza. Eso de que los americanos levantan el embargo ese, como le dicen, y se arregla el asunto, es ignorancia de la gente. El verdadero problema no está en los americanos sino en la falta que hubo siempre de dinosaurios. Porque sin dinosaurios no hay petróleo. (Torriente 60)

The simplicity of this line of reasoning is, in and of itself, humorous, and even Pucho takes the time to refute this as a logical rationale for the economic situation in which Cuba has found itself as he explains that all countries with oil did not have dinosaurs and that all countries with dinosaurs do not have oil. But nonetheless, he declares that he will in fact include this concept in his novel. While the theory is flawed, it does fit that the wealthiest countries are those with petroleum reserves. Dulce even insists that “Los siete países esos que siempre están volviéndose a reunir por allá, por Europa, deben haberse cogido para ellos solos todos los dinosaurios” (60). She mocks not only her own government for not being one of those seven, but also the greed of those seven nations for taking it all for themselves. She even goes as far as to blame early Spanish settlers:

Dulce. Así es la naturaleza, a nosotros nos tocó vivir en la parte del mundo que no tenía dinosaurios. Aunque quién sabe si aquí lo que pasó fue que se metieron los españoles. Porque si el padre De las Casas no pudo impedir que mataran a los indios, cómo iba a impedir que comieran las iguanas. ¿Y habría animal más parecido al dinosaurio que la iguana? Pero aquí no se las dejó crecer, evolucionar. No las iguanas de ahora, son las del principio que a lo mejor se hubiesen convertido en dinosaurios. (60)

Even though this may be a critique of an earlier authority group on the island, it remains a critique of authority, and one that includes deep tones of resignation. What can be done? There were no dinosaurs, whether due to nature or to the Spanish, and therefore the Cuban people are doomed to live as a nation without wealth. This means that there is nothing that the Cuban government can do to save Cuba from its economic situation; being a poor nation is something that they are simply destined to be. Dulce finishes by stating:

Dulce. El mundo está dividido en países que tuvieron dinosaurios y países que no los tuvieron. Y aquellos que tuvieron dinosaurios siempre han hecho de los otros lo que les ha dado la gana, como esos siete países que siempre se están volviendo a reunir por allá, por Europa. (60)

The end of this monologue speaks to the resignation of many Cubans regarding their economic situation, but it also comes across as humorous considering the theory that Dulce has created relative to the dinosaurs. While her theory is not based on facts or science, she has determined that this, and nothing else, is the deciding factor in determining the wealth of various nations, including her own. And even though Dulce herself is completely serious about her theory, it is not meant to be believed by the audience. They should find humor in what Dulce says because she is, to a certain degree, questioning (historical) authority and the “decision” to not allow dinosaurs to evolve on the island and thus create the circumstances in which the country could economically sustain itself through the production and sale of crude oil. There is much critique to be found within Dulce’s theory about the dinosaurs: a critique of the past, present, and future of Cuba are all wrapped up into this one statement.

As her brothers continue their dialogue, Dulce provides the audience with further choteo (again, unknowingly) as she divides the rice and makes a small packet for each day of the week.¹⁰¹ The choteo here mocks the portions that Cubans were allotted for certain food items in their ration book during the Special Period. These packets are specifically identified as *cartuchitos* to emphasize the smallness of each portion. The cartuchito of rice would most likely be a small paper tube that would accommodate very little rice. While there would be a sadness to this action, it is emphasized not to make people unhappy or upset, but to evoke laughter at a ridiculously relatable situation. When a play uses choteo at a moment like this, when everyday reality is close to the on-stage action, it takes a risk as to whether or not the result will be interpreted as funny.

As Dulce portions out the rice, her brothers debate the merits of potatoes. Celestino states that potatoes are more nutritious than rice and that, in the Soviet Union, nobody ever died from living off potatoes and that the children ate them and grew stronger than children in Cuba. By way of confirmation, Pucho asks:

Pucho. ¿En Rusia?

Celestino. Para mí siempre será la Unión Soviética. (*Dulce repite la acción y dice 'jueves'.*)

Pucho. Para los rusos no.

¹⁰¹ Throughout the course of pages 61 and 62, the stage directions follow Dulce's actions as she portions out the rice: "*Dulce separa un cartuchito con arroz e intercala: 'lunes'.*" "*Dulce intercala el 'martes', poniendo otro cartuchito al lado del primero.*" "*Dulce dice 'miércoles' y pone un tercer cartucho.*" "*Dulce repite la acción y dice 'jueves'.*" "*Dulce intercala el 'viernes' y repite la acción.*" "*Dulce dice 'sábado' y repite la acción.*" "*Dulce intercala el 'domingo' poniendo el último cartuchito con arroz de la semana.*"

Celestino. Cuando eran soviéticos estaban mejor. (*Dulce intercala el ‘viernes’ y repite la acción.*)

Pucho. Comiendo patatas.

Celestino. Sí, comiendo papas. Yo las comí siete años y me gradué de ingeniero y tenía mucha más lucidez que ahora. (*Dulce dice ‘sábado’ y repite la acción.*)

Pucho. Gracias a las patatas. (61-62)

Pucho’s use of the word *patata* (a blatant peninsularism) speaks to the intellectual airs of the youngest brother while simultaneously contrasting with Celestino’s *papas*, a word more commonly used in Cuba. Pucho’s word choice also seems to serve as a judgement of Celestino’s insistence on referring to the Russians as Soviets and to the fact that his brother places credit for the strength of the Soviets with potatoes in general. The last line of this exchange appears to have a sarcastic tone, as if Pucho highly doubts that potatoes deserve the credit for Celestino’s accomplishments in school. Pucho understands that the Soviet Union had problems as well and that those problems led to their failure as a state. Attributing a country’s successes solely to its choice to eat potatoes or rice is laughable. The choteo within the text is directed at Celestino for his belief in the power of potatoes. His brother ridicules him for this opinion but Celestino, similar to his sister and the dinosaurs, is blind to the humor because he truly believes what he says. The choteo beyond the text exists for the audience to understand that this degree of blind devotion can be detrimental. The humor here discredits the culture and activities of the “other” – in this case the failed Soviet regime. It could be considered mockery of a power, but that power no longer exists as such, so it is more a mockery of Celestino-type figures and their blind devotion to the Soviets, even after they have fallen.

Further choteo against the Soviets is apparent as Dulce recalls the meat that the Soviets sent during the early days of the United States trade embargo with Cuba:¹⁰²

Dulce. Aquella carne que tenía una vaca pintada en la lata y que la gente decía que era un oso y que aquello era carne de oso, aquella carne que nos salvó, cuando ningún país quería mandarnos nada, aquella carne a mí me caía bien; y eso que era carne en conserva, aunque había gente también que decía que era carne de persona, de los condenados de la Siberia en los campos de concentración. (66)

Without the support of the nation to the north, Cuba turned to the other great superpower of the time, the Soviet Union. While it would appear that many Cubans were critical of some of the supplies they received, Dulce did not really mind the meat. Although this canned meat was labeled beef, many people thought that the animal on the logo looked like a bear and that the meat inside was bear or, worse, that of political prisoners from Siberia. This choteo directed at Soviet food can be seen as discrediting the culture and activities of the other.¹⁰³ This is not choteo against Cuba or Cuba's government necessarily but rather Cuban reliance on Soviet goods.

¹⁰² The U.S. trade embargo against Cuba was first established in 1960 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower and restricted trade of U.S. goods to the island, excluding food and medicine. The embargo was made "permanent" in 1962, by President John F. Kennedy and was expanded to include U.S. imports from Cuba. While relations between the two countries were improved during the Obama administration, the embargo is still in place and will take an act of Congress to remove. Considering the recently elected administration of 2016, it is unlikely that this embargo will be lifted within the next four years.

¹⁰³ Stevens explains, "The breakup of the Soviet bloc and subsequent loss of Soviet support have again made the issue of self-definition a national concern [in Cuba] in the 1990s" (11). Soviet support can be equated with more stable times and with that stability gone, and no specific solution in sight, it is unsurprising that Torriente, through his characters, turns to choteo.

As the play continues, discussion turns to Celestino and the recent accident in which he was hit by a truck for the second time at the same intersection:

Dulce. ¿Por qué chocas siempre con el mismo chofer y a la misma hora, Celestino?

Pucho. Contra el mismo camión.

Celestino. Hold, hold, hold. Hunt, hunt, hunt.¹⁰⁴

Dulce. ¿Por qué chocas siempre con el mismo camión, Celestino?

Celestino. Porque siempre salgo por la misma calle y a la misma hora con mi bicicleta y el hombre pasa siempre con su camión por esa misma esquina.

Pucho. Donde existe una señal de Ceda el paso. Es para que ya te la supieras de memoria desde que te dieron el primer golpetazo.

Celestino. Pues nunca me acuerdo de la señal. No sé por qué nunca la veo.

Pucho. Nunca la ves. (69-70)

Dulce's line of questioning and Pucho's accusations have an impact on Celestino as his verb conjugation practice is completely off the mark. He simply repeats the same present tense of the verb rather than properly changing the tenses (hold, held, held and hunt, hunted, hunted).

Pucho's statements of fact can be seen as critical and even accusatory. With this choteo, Pucho criticizes his brother for his role as spokesman of a failed system. Celestino is the communist; he is the one who believes in and follows the rules and regulations of his society (with the exception of the pig!), and Pucho is critical of his brother's repeated mistake (intentional or not). And it

¹⁰⁴ It is not made clear exactly why Celestino practices English verb conjugation, but it is likely related to the increased importance of the language on the island and the decreased importance of Russian. The mistakes he makes in this section indicate less about his ability to speak the language and more about his concentration on ignoring his siblings.

could be that when Pucho states, “Nunca la ves,” he is referring to the bigger picture. Perhaps Celestino, just like Cuba itself, repeatedly fails to see the obvious. Hidden within the humor of one brother to another, the text appears to use choteo to mock the obliviousness of the Cuban authorities to see what should be most obvious to them: that the country cannot improve if it continues to repeat past mistakes.

After a brief silence between the characters in which Pozo’s song receives the focus once again, Pucho brings up his novel. The choteo in the excerpt he shares speaks to the general condition and treatment of the Cuban people at this time:

Pucho. ¿Quieres que te lea un pedacito de mi novela? (*Pucho coge los papeles y lee.*) “La noche cayó sobre la ciudad maldecida y el olor del mar fue la única esperanza de sus engeguedidos moradores que ya ni siquiera dormían ni estaban despiertos. Fue entonces que aquel negro enorme, terror y delicia de las viejas y blancas vaginas reprimidas del lugar subió al techo más alto y sin decir siquiera ‘regresé’, sacó su miembro descomunal, orinó largamente y la gente pensó que era una lluvia salida del mar, o el mar mismo y salado lo que caía sobre sus cabezas. Y se hizo la luz...” (*La luz se apaga.*) Me cago en... (*A oscuras.*) “Y se hizo la luz, la luz otra vez y para siempre sobre la ciudad olvidada incluso del silencio”. (70)

This selection from his novel demonstrates Pucho’s perspective on the Cuban situation. This passage represents blind optimism and the veracity of choosing to deny or ignore reality. From this fragment, “la gente” appear to be the object of Pucho’s humor, while his siblings and the audience receive and interpret the joke. But Celestino, Dulce, and even the audience are also

targets of this humor. They too are being (figuratively) urinated on and they appear to simply accept it as another side effect of the sea itself. The other level of choteo in this selection has everything to do with timing. Pucho exclaims, “Y se hizo la luz” as the lights in the apartment go out. In this case the choteo originates in the stage directions and not from the characters. This moment is a critique of the power outages and blackouts that Cubans experienced daily during the Special Period. This choteo stems from the collective experience of the Cuban people and exists as a consequence of that experience. There is a critique of the constraints of the Cuban system masked by the humorous timing of a scheduled blackout. And while choteo does express a certain degree of resignation in its user, the text here also suggests that it is not enough to simply live with this situation, but that, in order to see the light, there must *actually* be light.

A short time later the conversation turns to an artist friend of Pucho’s. It is insinuated that Pucho is gay.¹⁰⁵ But Pucho also does his best to imply that Celestino himself is closeted. Celestino denies this completely, further provoking Pucho’s choteo. The younger brother recalls a situation in which his friend wished to paint Celestino:

Pucho. Quería pintarte desnudo ¿te acuerdas? Con una corona de laurel en la cabeza y la hoz y el martillo en la mano. ¿Por fin se pusieron de acuerdo o no?

Celestino. ¿De acuerdo en qué?

Pucho. Ibas a ir a su estudio.

Celestino. ¿Qué estudio?

Pucho. Su estudio. El que tenía en su casa.

Celestino. Nunca quedé con nadie en ir a ningún estudio.

¹⁰⁵ On page 84, Celestino explains why he found it necessary to associate with Pucho’s friends. He says, “Por necesidad. Cuando llegué de Moscú me encontré a mamá destruida porque él le había dicho la verdad.”

Pucho. Él me dijo que se habían puesto de acuerdo.

Celestino. Porque era eso lo que él quería.

Pucho. Te dio el teléfono y tú aceptaste posar desnudo para él con la corona de laurel en la cabeza y la hoz y el martillo en la mano.

Dulce. ¿Y eso qué quiere decir? Todas las obras de los artistas tienen un de eso... ¿Cómo es que tú le dices?

Pucho. Tienen un mensaje.

Dulce. ¿Y cuál es el mensaje de Celestino en pelotas con una corona de laurel en la cabeza y la hoz y martillo en la mano?

Pucho. Pregúntaselo a él. (79-81)

Pucho is choteando with his brother here. He knows that it bothers Celestino to be considered a homosexual.¹⁰⁶ Celestino prides himself for being what he considers a “real man.” Dulce’s innocent questions regarding the meaning of this particular piece of imagined art, although unknowingly on her part, feed into Pucho’s choteo. With this description of the artist’s piece, Pucho insinuates that his friend was interested in his brother for his body. He also alludes to the idea that Celestino represents the perfect physical beauty of man combined with the perfect political ideology. Pucho’s choteo implies that his friend considers Celestino the embodiment of both these things and hints that it says a lot about Celestino’s character. Pucho may be choteando

¹⁰⁶ While it was considered both immoral and illegal to engage in homosexual activities prior to and in the early years of the Cuban Revolution, the Penal Code of 1979 officially decriminalized private homosexuality. It was not until 1987 when public displays of the homosexual “condition” were legalized (Lumsden 81-82). This did not eliminate discrimination and even persecution of gays and lesbians in Cuba. The communist regime was “less immediately repressive” (157) in the 1990s, although, according to Lumsden, “Gays are tolerated so long as they know their place, are discreet about their sexual orientation, and do not contravene gender norms in their public behavior” (189). Perhaps it is others’ knowledge of any homosexual behaviors that Celestino fears.

with his brother, but, I argue, so is this unnamed artist friend. The combination of the decadence of the Greek and Roman empires (as suggested by the laurel crown) with the death of Soviet communism (as indicated by the hammer and sickle) seems like a mockery of the Cuban socialist system. As a visual form of art, this painting of Celestino in the nude would greatly belittle the requirements and constraints of the contemporary communist system both within and outside of Cuba. The artist, perhaps, is implying that a man like Celestino represents the *new* “New Man.”¹⁰⁷

Even Celestino acknowledges that he is the target of Pucho’s choteo. He retorts with a comment about the difficulty of living with a brother with Pucho’s “características” and Dulce reprimands him for it. He retorts with, “¡Qué, Dulce, qué! Ya me tiene cansado con sus dobles sentidos, sus pullitas. Todo el tiempo pinchando, pinchando, pinchando” (82). His response to her admonishment is one that recognizes the choteo in the situation, although it seems that he does not have the ability to return the choteo. And while he never expressly uses the word, it is clear that Celestino is referring to choteo with his mention of double meanings and the pestering and provoking instigations of his brother.

When Dulce insists that Pucho’s sexuality is of no consequence to his siblings, her younger brother insists that she is wrong: “A él sí. ¿Por qué te crees que se pasa la vida tratando de restregarme por la cara sus cojones? Total, el machismo encubre otras debilidades” (83). Again, Pucho insinuates that his brother is a closeted homosexual. Whether or not he really

¹⁰⁷ In Ernesto Guevara’s 1965 essay “El socialismo y el hombre en Cuba,” he identifies the qualities and requirements of the “New Man” that will be a part of creating and maintaining a true communist society for Cuba. While he admits that “su imagen no está todavía acabada [y] no podría estarlo nunca ya que el proceso marcha paralelo al desarrollo de formas económicas nuevas” (8), he sets forth the ideals that this “New Man” must uphold. I suggest that such a painting of Celestino would represent the *new* “New Man” because his socialist idealism is combined with a physical beauty that denotes a certain level of decadence that Guevara would attribute to capitalist societies but that could be seen to a certain degree in 1990s Cuba.

believes this to be true is of little importance here, it is a comment used to hurt his brother. He has moved beyond choteo here and gone to direct insults. And when Celestino insists that he only spent time with Pucho's friends in order to save his brother and make his mother feel better, Pucho is even further offended. He insists that he does not wish to remain in the house but recognizes that he has no other choice because there is currently no other way he could survive.

Shortly thereafter, the conversation returns to the pig. The siblings still have not decided what to do with the animal. As Pucho works himself up over the (illegal) situation in which they have found themselves, Dulce tries to calm him down, not only for his own sake, but also because the neighbors might hear him and perhaps even report the situation to the authorities. There is fear in Dulce's words and actions, but her brother carries on:

Pucho. Estamos criando un puerco que no nos deja vivir, ni respirar, ni recibir visitas. ¡Un puerco, un puerco, un puerco! Estamos criando un puerco en los umbrales del año dos mil, a escondidas, en un edificio de apartamentos, desafiando las leyes sanitarias que han hecho posible el florecimiento de las ciudades del planeta, porque necesitamos proteínas, proteínas, y manteca, sobre todo manteca, muchísima manteca, infinita manteca. (90)

Pucho's outburst would certainly resonate with audience members as a critique of the system that does not provide its people with sufficient protein or fat. Whether or not the audience would interpret this outburst as humorous is more difficult to discern. While Pucho's diatribe certainly opposes the discourse of power and demonstrates the discontent and frustration with the system, it is questionable as to whether it does this through humor or not. Audience reception will always

vary, and without firsthand accounts it is impossible to know exactly how an audience would react to this outburst. There is humor in the absurdity of Pucho's statement, but the appreciation for this humor depends on the balance between the benign and the violation as understood by each audience member.

In the end, it is Celestino who takes up the knife and kills the pig (off stage).¹⁰⁸ The siblings then consider how to prepare the pig now that it is dead. Dulce continuously asks what will happen next. Celestino explains that they must boil the pig, drain it, and then cut it into pieces, freezing some parts and eating others so as to survive the economic crisis. But his sister continues asking the same questions. There is little choteo in this moment as the three somberly consider the loss of utopia and the disillusion they feel now that their only hope, the pig, is dead. As they ponder what to do next, there seem to be few viable options:

Dulce. El animalito, Celestino. ¿Tiene los ojos abiertos o cerrados? ¿Y las patitas? Lo que más me gustaba eran las patitas. Las movía así, pidiendo comida. El pobrecito. Yo no puedo.

Celestino. Pues lo cambiamos por otro igual, del mismo peso y del mismo tamaño y nos lo comemos.

Dulce. Jamás volveré a probar carne de puerco, porque todos me harán recordar a este. Para mí los puercos están perdonados.

Celestino. ¿Y qué quieres mi hermana? ¿Embalsamarlo?

Pucho. ¿Por qué no lo vendemos y con el dinero que ganemos compramos maní?

¹⁰⁸ The pig is never seen on stage at any point during the performance and no indication is given as to whether it is heard or smelled. Logistically, this would be related to the difficulty in obtaining an animal for a live performance, but it also speaks to the illicit behavior of raising the pig in secret.

Dulce. ¿Maní?

Pucho. Maní. Buscamos azúcar, hacemos turrone y así nos dedicamos a otra cosa. (105)

Celestino, Dulce, and Pucho struggle with what to do with the pig and, rather than eat it, they consider selling it. If they use the money from selling the pig to buy peanuts, they could make candies to sell, and with the money that they receive from that, that they could purchase a small plot of land, and on that land, they could plant food to eat. However, it is unlikely that this daydream will ever come true. First, it would be difficult to obtain the sugar they would need for the candies; then, it would be challenging to sell their candies to others who have very little money; and finally, purchasing a plot of land would be next to impossible in Cuba at this time. The more the siblings discuss the possibilities, the more outlandish the suggestions become. This is the final piece of choteo in the play and stands as an example of cultural choteo in which the spectators, not the characters, find humor in the situation. It appears as though this text criticizes the unattainable dreams people have regarding survival and having enough food to eat. The audience might see the humor in this situation because of the unrealistic expectations created by the characters' imaginations. The humor lies in the obviously unrealistic nature of these expectations. The critique here is no longer of the authorities, but of the Cuban people and their resignation to the economic situation. The people are now the target of the choteo, and whether they would laugh or not would depend on their perception of balance between the benign and the violation in this choteo. Torriente seemingly acknowledges that resignation is the most likely route for these siblings, as well as for the many Cubans affected by the economic crisis who are represented in these types.¹⁰⁹ Stevens suggests that the "family's isolation in their battle for

¹⁰⁹ Stevens suggests that "life in the apartment has a ritualistic, timeless quality. The passage of time acquires meaning only inasmuch as it relates to sustenance... Thus days of the week matter only in terms of portioning their

survival, by extension, embodies the situation of the Cuban nation” (206), but I would argue that the battle is being surrendered more than it is being fought because the siblings do nothing to attempt to change their situation.

The desire to fight back in *Manteca* is less discernible than in earlier works studied in previous chapters. While plays such as *Junto al río*, *El flaco y el gordo*, and *La muerte del Ñeque* looked to the past to critique the present, *Manteca* evaluates the present. Its choteo is occasionally obvious and at other times much more discreet. The critique is apparent, but a solution is not presented other than through the idea that one must create their own form of survival, such as with the pig. The characters in this play have resigned themselves to their situation, but they never lose hope. Even at the end, they think toward the future and not the present in terms of their survival. If they dwell on the present they will feel stuck, but if they look to the future, there is hope (and perhaps a bit of delusion as well).

The successful delivery of choteo in *Manteca* is open to debate. As McGraw explains, “Comedy... depends on context. Creating humor is a delicate operation built on layers of shared knowledge, assumptions, and innuendo. Remove one piece, and it all falls apart” (128). Depending on a particular audience’s reception to the piece, the humor may or may not be successful. Undoubtedly the shared knowledge and innuendo in this work would be understood by many, but the assumption that audiences should take this critique and find humor in it may not be as universal as one might think. McGraw also states that “to come up with the best comedy, we have to skirt ever closer to the realm of tragedy, hurt, and pain” (147), but if playwrights are unsuccessful in their approach, the comedy may be lost on the viewer or reader. As was previously mentioned, some of the first responses to this play did not see its comedy.

rice adequately. Dispensing rations becomes a ritual for Dulce... Repetitive tasks also occupy Celestino’s and Pucho’s time...” (205-6). This repetition denotes a certain level of resignation to tasks that focus only on survival.

Vivian Martínez Tabares describes her first experience reading the text of *Manteca* by describing the context in which she came to it and stating that “el ambiente precario de uno de los años más difíciles para la economía cubana se confundía entre la escena provisional y el viejo lunetario. Y la situación dramática resultaba perturbadora y a la vez apasionante” (“Delirios habaneros” 14). She mentions nothing of comedy at this moment. In *Pensar el teatro en voz alta*, however, Martínez Tabares later recognizes a certain degree of humor in the work when she states, “[Y] es en ese juego de autorreconocimiento, distancia crítica y burla del absurdo, que tantas veces asoma en nuestro comportamiento cotidiano y con el que tan a menudo nos defendemos de nuestras desgracias, en el que la obra consume su eficacia y gana para el teatro un espacio de debate social en ocasiones más vivo y plural que el de los medios de difusión” (62). The defense mechanism that I believe she refers to here is choteo. The mockery of the absurd and the criticism of one’s circumstances is simply a protective activity used to bring attention to a given situation. Where it may often be impossible to establish a social debate in more mass forms of media such as television and radio because of state control, theater allows for the creation of a space in which this debate can come to life. Choteo is a tool that allows for a more open reception of this conversation. The live audience also creates the possibility for additional discussion and contemplation of the situation. Even without open debate, the ideas would be planted for further consideration of the subject, presumably one of the concerns held by the state in their early attempts to censor the work.

In her 1997 *Teatro y utopía*, Magaly Muguercia reveals that “‘criar un puerco en un apartamento’ es algo que hoy sucede *realmente* en Cuba. En este sentido el texto retoma un costumbrismo de sesgo grotesco que es tradición dentro de la dramaturgia cubana... El texto, al reproducirse a partir de esta ‘torcida’ situación de base, hace de la *forma grotesca* el término

fuerte, estilísticamente hablando, del discurso” (17). The grotesque may not always be directly connected to choteo, but in the siblings’ situation it is.¹¹⁰ By demonstrating the customs of the day in such a grotesque manner, Torriente appears to be choteando with the realistic situation represented in his play. Something that is grotesque is either comically or repulsively ugly or distorted, and the fact that the pig never physically appears on the stage allows this grotesque to remain within the comical. Yes, the pig’s blood is seen running across the floor (Torriente 108), but the actual death of the animal is not shown. The consequences are expressed both verbally and physically, and it is in these consequences where one can find the humor: the indecision of the siblings regarding what to do next; the thought that they could do something more than eat the animal; and the belief that they will start again with another young pig.

Muguercia suggests that “*Manteca* es, en el último análisis, una reflexión sobre el sentido y los caminos posibles de la utopía” (30). And while this may be true, I argue that all of these possible paths will lead to a dead end. *Manteca* shows that utopia is impossible to achieve, so it does not matter how many possible paths exist if none leads to paradise. There must be action, but any successful action at this point must take place outside of the revolutionary system as they have known it. In regards to the three siblings, Townsend suggests that “above all, they share a sense of apprehension. They can’t stay in this stuffy apartment forever; Cuba can’t survive as an island, and their own immobility is all the evidence they need to know that there’s no longer anything revolutionary about what’s taking place” (302). This is how choteo in *Manteca*

¹¹⁰ According to the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, the grotesque in literature is “commonly employed to denote the ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant, freakish and unnatural; in short aberrations from the desirable norms of harmony, balance and proportion” (367). It focuses on the elements of humanity that can be distorted or exaggerated and does so with the intention of invoking both disgust and compassion. Grotesque elements can be found in various forms of comedy including caricature, parody, and satire. In that sense, choteo can incorporate elements of the grotesque, although it need not always do so. While the grotesque can create comic relief, it does not require the resignation that choteo so often denotes.

connects to the Revolution and the revolutionary government. This is a critique of what has taken place on the island after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the spectators themselves are humorously represented via these characters. Therefore, it is choteo against the spectators on the part of the author. As Martínez Tabares states:

Manteca lanza una mirada descarnada e incisiva a lo más álgido de la realidad inmediata no exenta de humor ni de una imaginativa capacidad de deconstrucción para convertir las expresiones “lógicas” de la vida cotidiana en discurso de ilogicidad que revela y refuerza signos y significados de alcance mucho más potente que en su naturaleza primigenia. (“*Manteca*: catarsis y absurdo” 98)

Torriente uses humor to comment on the complacency of the Cuban people as well as their government, which has restricted the people’s ability to fight for change as they try to survive. However, it is possible that, while for some the humorous experience of the play would allow for catharsis, other audience members may not have wanted or been ready to laugh at themselves during this difficult moment. The division of the rice into small packets for each day of the week, the inability to decide what to do with the pig, and even the moments in which the three discuss why they have remained on the island when even their family members (Celestino’s wife and children, Dulce’s children) have left are all reflective of Torriente’s critical humor toward everyday Cuban life.

Choteo works best when it combines speech and action. Martínez Tabares insists that “la palabra es el instrumento expresivo fundamental de la obra de Alberto Pedro... una palabra que sabe articular la fluidez del discurso coloquial, y que aquí [en *Manteca*] se enriquece en las

cómodas transiciones que van del realismo exacerbado, casi naturalismo, al absurdo, tanto a nivel sintáctico como en el sentido de los parlamentos” (*Didascalias* 66). And while words are certainly fundamental to the humor in *Manteca*, the set, props, and actions of the characters on stage also influence the choteo here. Again, I reference Dulce’s division of the rice, the siblings’ clothing, and even the unseen pig. Such elements are loaded with both meaning and humor. The anti-hierarchical and critical voice expressed in the visual elements creates a choteo that is both critical of the system and of those within the system who are unable to move forward. Torriente does not necessarily offer a solution to the problem represented in his play, but by presenting the economic issues through humor he affords the audience the opportunity to further consider the situation and perhaps act to change it.

The fall of the Soviet Union had a tremendous economic impact on the Cuban people. Theater was just one of the many areas in which they expressed their frustrations toward this situation. With *Manteca*, Torriente confronts the Cuban economic crisis while simultaneously pushing the audience to recognize that maintaining these circumstances is not a viable long-term option for survival. The economic (and simultaneously, political) problem must be confronted and dealt with and perhaps even opposed. Torriente has claimed that “el teatro tiene la posibilidad de conmovir, de alterar, es como una granada... Por su carácter artesanal y por la presencia y el diálogo directo entre el actor y el espectador, el teatro es siempre una conspiración” (“El teatro es una conspiración” 9). Considering his words, it is difficult to believe that Torriente simply wrote the play to demonstrate the Cuban situation. Instead, it appears an attempt to change it. Torriente expresses a desire to conspire with the audience; *Manteca* is an ideal example of such a conspiracy. Martínez Tabares also sees this piece as something more than a simple representation of contemporary Cuba:

Pero a la vez, entre líneas puede leerse otro relato – y este juego dual que obliga al lector-espectador permanentemente a meditar es otra de las virtudes de la pieza -: la búsqueda y el encuentro optimista de opciones para sustituir al puerco de algún modo exaltan también el espacio necesario en la sociedad cubana para las iniciativas personales, el compromiso de cada uno en aportar en la búsqueda de caminos y soluciones para salir de la crisis e impulsar el desarrollo del país. (“*Manteca*: catarsis y absurdo” 99)

Torriente does not simply attempt to give his audience hope; instead, he expresses that, while utopia may seem unattainable, one must always fight for something better. It is suggested that, with resistance, Cubans can change their own situations and not eventually become like the three siblings in his play. One of the most effective ways to combine this message with a conspiratorial approach is through humor. Townsend asserts that “the play does what a lot of slapstick humor does: it takes metaphors and makes them literal and uses the mundane world of the material to poke fun at our tendency to think that the truth is always abstract. But it also elevates the concrete and corporeal by showing that what seems to be most immediate and self-evident can also gesture toward something that lies beyond its own bounds” (303). Although Townsend’s focus is on slapstick because of the literal interpretation of the truths presented, that is an incomplete explanation for the humor found in *Manteca*. Choteo can incorporate similar elements to those of slapstick, including an opposition to the discourse of power; however, there are additional layers to the Cuban humor. And whereas slapstick uses broad levels of farce, choteo does more than belittle a situation; it also demonstrates a resignation to a situation in a way that slapstick does not appear to do. *Manteca* demonstrates a clash between resignation and

a fight for survival in conjunction with humor. *Manteca* deals with a subject that was relevant and that resonated with viewers.¹¹¹ Using humor to address the economic problems in Cuba allowed audiences to enjoy the story while simultaneously acknowledging these problems, something that was only possible due to the ability to stage this production.

Manteca is one of the most well-known plays of the 1990s to evaluate the Cuban financial crisis of the time, though others soon followed. As the decade continued, more playwrights addressed both the causes and effects of Cuba's economic situation. In some cases, playwrights created characters that not only spoke out against the system but also *acted* outside of the Revolution. The two other plays analyzed in this chapter both include characters who took steps to escape their situations, albeit to varying degrees of success. However, it is notable that *Laberinto de lobos*, by Miguel Terry Valdespino, was only staged once, and *Vereda tropical*, by Joaquín Miguel Cuartas Rodríguez, has yet to be staged on the island.

Laberinto de lobos: Choteo, Patriotism, and Disillusion

Miguel Terry Valdespino (1963-) is an Afro-Cuban writer who was born in Cuba and remains on the island to this day. He studied journalism at the University of Havana and has founded and written for multiple cultural magazines. The author of countless newspaper, magazine, journal, and blog articles, he has also written more than half a dozen plays, the majority of which have won awards.¹¹² *Laberinto de lobos* was written in June 1993, and published in 1994 (Prizant 60). This play has been much less studied than *Manteca*, although

¹¹¹ According to Camilla Stevens, "Despite the play's challenging form, or indeed, perhaps because of it, *Manteca* clearly struck a chord with audiences eager to experience honest portrayals of the difficult circumstances in which they live" (203-4).

¹¹² In addition to *Laberinto de lobos*, other award-winning plays by Terry include *Ángeles y cenizas* (Havana Theater Award, 1991), *Los duros pierden como Humphrey Bogart* (Regino Botti National Theater Award), and *La piedra en la boca* (Jesús Gregorio National Theater Award, 2004) (Prizant 59-60).

both plays appear to be critical of the Cuban situation of the early 1990s. But while Torriente was known for his work in the theater, not only as a playwright but also as a director and actor, Terry is primarily recognized for his journalism. Productions for this play, or at least records of them, are minimal, though *Laberinto de lobos* was awarded the Pinos Nuevos prize in 1994.¹¹³

Laberinto de lobos is a two-act play that takes place in Beatriz's Havana apartment during the height of the Special Period in 1993. The three characters, Beatriz, Felipe, and Sebastián, all around thirty years old, were born into the Revolution. In *Cuba Inside Out, Revolution and Contemporary Theater*, Yael Prizant explains that the choice to use characters in this age group shows that "Terry attempts to reconcile the hardships of the Special Period on Cuba's younger generation" (61). At the very least, it demonstrates the effects of this economic situation on those who have always lived within the Revolution and did not fight for the ideals that it represents. While it certainly demonstrates the hardships that they experience, it also confirms the resignation that I have spoken about throughout this study. None of the characters in this play truly fight for what they believe in, they simply allow life around them to happen and deal with the consequences as issues arise.

The play takes place the day after a party to celebrate the upcoming marriage of Beatriz's friend, Dorys, to a Frenchman. Beatriz is alone in her apartment when her friend Felipe arrives with what he claims is a surprise. That surprise turns out to be her former friend and lover, Sebastián. The three friends discuss their lives and life choices in this new Cuba. Sebastián is a defender of life on the island, while both Felipe and Beatriz seek escape from their situations.

¹¹³ The only evidence I have found of a staging of this play is in Yael Prizant's book, *Cuba Inside Out, Revolution, and Contemporary Theater*, which mentions a 1993 staging by Miguel Navarro (60). The Pinos Nuevos award was created in the 1990s with the support of an Argentinian publishing house by the same name. In light of the economic conditions during the Special Period, publication in Cuba was virtually impossible. This award allowed for the publication of hundreds of Cuban works by emerging authors that otherwise would not have been published.

The most plausible way they see to accomplish this is to marry a foreigner, someone who will then take them to another country. This is why they have celebrated Dorys's impending marriage to the Frenchman, why Felipe is engaged to a woman from Argentina, and why Beatriz is heartbroken over her Italian lover Luciano's decision to leave her for another woman.

Felipe is soon sent to his father-in-law's house to procure some food. There is nothing to eat in Beatriz's house, and simply going out and buying food is not an option. Felipe is not a fool, however, and he realizes that his mission is also intended to double as an opportunity for Sebastián and Beatriz to rekindle their physical relationship. Once their friend has left, however, Sebastián and Beatriz begin to argue over their chosen career paths. Sebastián accuses Beatriz of being a "puta" (19) and claims that she was only with Luciano for his money and position as a foreigner. After some further arguing as to Beatriz's life choices, the two end up in bed together.

The second act takes place about an hour later and opens with a naked Sebastián sitting on the edge of the bed after waking up. Little has changed, and each still makes judgements about the other for their life decisions. However, one thing in particular comes from their post-coital conversation: they decide to take a weekend away together. It appears they have forgiven one another. Shortly after, Felipe returns with some food and the story of a woman with whom he wishes to set up Sebastián, but Sebastián is not interested. Beatriz then receives a phone call from Dorys, who explains that she has spoken with Luciano, who wishes to see Beatriz again. With that information, it seems as though Beatriz has forgotten about Sebastián once again in exchange for someone who can offer her more. Sebastián physically tries to stop his lover from leaving but fails and Felipe rationalizes that this was bound to happen because Beatriz will not be tied down. As Felipe prepares something for Sebastián to eat, the other man turns on the radio

only to hear the announcer speaking about the problems experienced by other communist youth around the world.

While *Laberinto de lobos* takes place in a small Havana apartment, it also represents the Cuban situation at large. As Prizant indicates, “The immediate consequences of ongoing ‘shortages’ and ‘efforts’” as represented by Miguel Terry “portray how the economics of globalization and the Special Period affected individual identities and relationships” (58-59). Terry is successful in his approach to demonstrating this impact on the individual while still speaking to a broader selection of because he writes his characters as *types* that are identifiable for a Cuban audience. Within Terry’s use of types, he gives his characters the ability to joke with one another about their situations. *Laberinto de lobos* employs both the cultural choteo prevalent in each of the plays I have chosen for this study and an inter-character choteo (both in dialogue and action). His characters express their pessimism about their economic situation through choteo with and against one another. Prizant’s claim that “the prevailing cynicism of the era frames all of the interactions in the play” (63) is substantiated by the choteo utilized in much of the communication throughout *Laberinto*. As the characters criticize one another via choteo, they are also speaking out against the failings of the system overall. Again, the attitudes and behaviors of Terry’s characters are representative of the attitudes and behaviors of Cubans in general. I would, nevertheless, take Prizant’s assessment a step further and argue that this bitterness is viewed not only through the physical appearance of the stage and the play’s setting, but also via the words spoken by the characters within the play. As I will demonstrate below, the combination of these elements allows the playwright to use choteo to more fully address the economic situation in the country at this time.

Beatriz's apartment is described as a simple room with a bed, a table and chairs, and a few other pieces of furniture. The upstage wall is decorated with tourist posters advertising Cuban goods and touting the benefits of a happy stay on the island. The place is a mess from the party the night before with empty beer bottles and foreign magazines littering the room. Immediately, the juxtaposition between the room and its contents becomes apparent; here there is an unsatisfactory blend of the Cuban and the foreign. Beatriz is in the room. It is noontime and she is just waking up. As she turns on the radio she hears the following:

Locutor. (*En off.*)... Y cuando faltan tan sólo nueve minutos para las doce meridiano, el periodista Gustavo Cordero ya tiene listo su comentario, que en esta ocasión aborda la grave crisis económica y social que afecta a los países del este de Europa (*Beatriz bosteza ruidosamente y se estira a sus anchas.*)

Cordero. (*En off.*) Muy buenas tardes, estimados oyentes... Sin lugar a dudas, el abandono de los principios del Socialismo en los países del este europeo, ha traído amargas consecuencias para los habitantes de tales naciones. Obreros con salarios irrisorios, ancianos con misérrimas pensiones, y jóvenes plagados por la indiferencia, los vicios y la desesperanza comienzan a mirar con pesimismo...

Beatriz apaga la radio. (Terry 8)

From the very first spoken words, choteo is present. This entire description of what is happening to the former Soviet bloc countries mirrors what is occurring in Cuba. Although the voices on the radio describe the situation as a result of the abandonment of Socialist principles, the description could also illustrate the Cuban situation at the time. While this cultural choteo is unintentional on

the part of the speaker, it is quite calculated on the part of the playwright. Here Terry describes Cuban circumstances, but, by having the speakers only acknowledge the Eastern European situation, he renders the government-led media the victim of his choteo. Terry, a journalist himself, critiques media that ignore Cuba's problems and instead focus on the same issues occurring across the ocean. It is suggested that these problems occur in the former Soviet bloc countries due to the loss of Socialist principles, but the fact that similar concerns exist for Cubans who continue to uphold these ideals is ignored.

The audience is, to a certain extent, a victim of the choteo here as well. Beatriz shutting off the radio is representative of the people's responses to this form of discourse. Just as she ignores the speakers, so too do many Cubans. They do not counter the arguments made by the government-led media, nor do they fight to make any changes. Terry mocks their resignation to their own situation as Beatriz shuts off communication regarding the outside world. Her focus is on what immediately surrounds her, and in this case it is her disaster of an apartment. There is no time to worry about others as she considers her own circumstances.

Shortly thereafter, Felipe arrives with Sebastián. As the two men wait in the main room for Beatriz to wash up, their conversation turns to the small suitcase that Sebastián carries:

Felipe. (*Dando golpecitos en la maleta.*) ¿Qué tienes aquí: un discurso optimista de 150 páginas?

Sebastián. No, unos papeles y un periódico de hoy.

Felipe. ¿Y qué dice nuestra prensa? ¿Pasa o no pasa el cadáver del Imperialismo?

(*Riendo.*) (9-10)

Felipe's first question, I expect, alludes to the hours-long speeches that Castro would deliver to the people. It could be anything, but Felipe chooses to ask if it is an optimistic speech. Given Felipe's already apparent trait of making light of serious situations (he had, only a moment before, joked about Dorys's engagement to the Frenchman, exclaiming "¡Adiós, subdesarrollo!"), this comment demonstrates a mockery of authority figures. Sebastián appears to be a serious individual, and he is a supporter of the Revolution, so Felipe jokes that whatever his friend is carrying must somehow be connected to the long speeches that Fidel was known for presenting. When the reply comes in the negative, Felipe turns his mockery to the newspaper that Sebastián has with him. It is evident from his laughter that Felipe does not believe that imperialism has died, nor that it ever will, but it *is* a subject that is likely to be covered by the Cuban papers. This choteo is directed at the government-controlled media once again, as Felipe clearly does not believe that the news covered is actually news or unbiased in any way. While Felipe's choteo may be critical of the press, Terry may have also included this moment in his play to critique those who have resigned themselves to accept that the news will be useless or, at the least, without substance or meaning. I see Terry's inclusion of this moment as an attempt to demonstrate that simply acknowledging that the news is not news is insufficient.

Each time Felipe wishes to address a serious (or even semi-serious) subject, he supports his narrative with a bit of choteo. When discussing the previous evening's party, he turns to the subject of dollars and the reality of the value of the dollar in present-day Cuba:

Felipe. En La Habana no queda ningún lugar donde uno pueda emborracharse con tranquilidad, y si no tienes dólares o eres hijito de papá, te tienes que conformar con el primer ron de mala muerte que aparezca. (*Pausa.*) Pasa como en el cuento. (*Simulando*

una voz autoritaria.) “Ciudadano, ya el Mausoleo está cerrado. Si quiere ver al camarada Lenin, tiene que regresar mañana.” (*Más natural.*) Y cuando el ciudadano dice que es un turista extranjero y tiene dólares arriba, el guardia responde: (*Sumiso.*) “¡Dólares! ¿Por qué no me lo dijo antes? Quiere usted pasar o prefiere que le traigamos al viejo?” (*Felipe ríe estruendosamente; pero Sebastián apenas esboza una sonrisa de cumplido.*) Está bueno, ¿verdad? Ya te lo sabías. Por eso no te reíste. Pero esa es la verdad. (*Pausa.*) (10-11).

It is apparent that Sebastián does not appreciate Felipe’s choteo against the government and its economic priorities. Recalling McGraw’s benign violation theory, clearly the violation here is too great for Sebastián to enjoy the joke. He does not find humor in considering any corruption within the socialist system that he supports. For Felipe there is a perfect balance between the benign and the violation in this situation. He understands that it is risky to mock the system, but he knows that, among friends, he can safely make these jokes. While Terry’s inclusion of anti-authoritarian choteo shows a change in perception by authority figures as to what degree of mockery was acceptable for Cuban artists and writers, it may not have been without consequence, as there is no evidence of further performances after 1994.

Sebastián, as the politically and socially conservative type in this play, is often and easily the target of choteo. Felipe, and later Beatriz, poke fun at this man who upholds the tenets of the Revolution so fervently. However, Sebastián is not a flawless revolutionary. He is more than happy to drink with the other two, even if the liquor was likely obtained on the black market. After a brief moment of tension between Beatriz and Sebastián, Felipe encourages the first man to have a drink, but not without mocking his friend once more:

Felipe. (*Buscando romper la tensión.*) Dale, Sebastián, prueba el Pedro Domecq. Cógele el gusto a las bebidas que hacen los enemigos del proletariado. (*Al ver que Sebastián se lleva el vaso a los labios, adopta una pose caricaturesca.*) "Camaradas, no probéis las bebidas del Capital, que corrompe el espíritu de sólo probarlas y nos aparta de la lucha... ¡El Pedro Domecq es el opio del pueblo!" (*Riendo estruendosamente.*) Carlos Marx, *Obras Completas*. Tomo diez. (*En voz baja, como si no quisiera ser escuchado.*) Por eso no lo venden en ninguna parte. (14)

Again, Sebastián serves as the target of this choteo. He becomes the victim on behalf of all Cuban citizens who insist on following party lines. Felipe's play with the famous Marx quote, "Religion... is the opium of the people,"¹¹⁴ takes his choteo all the way back to the German philosopher whose beliefs formed many of the Socialist ideals practiced in Cuba. It is no longer religion that will keep the people subdued, it is alcohol, and specifically high-quality, high-priced, foreign alcohol. Sebastián therefore should take heed as this will go against everything that Marx, Castro, and the Revolution stand for. Felipe's lack of concern for the comments he makes regarding the Revolution feeds his mockery of the entire system. His choteo targets everyone from the individual (both Sebastián and Beatriz), to the authorities, to the ideals of the Revolution itself. Even Beatriz participates in the mockery of the system as she also uses choteo to critique the Cuban way of life, claiming, "Cuando uno prueba el Pedro Domecq, se da cuenta

¹¹⁴ Also often translated as "Religion... is the opiate of the masses," the phrase comes from the German "*Die Religion... ist das Opium des Volkes.*" Felipe's choice to quote Marx, albeit with modifications to the original quote alludes to the idea of the "orphaned quote" as a means of avoiding censorship by "inserting a 'canonized' text so that it carries the potentially censured message" (Graham-Jones 21). By using a portion of a quote by Marx as a basis for his choteo, Felipe (and by proxy, Terry) avoids censorship issues. See also Roberto Hozven for further information on the orphaned quote.

que la vida tiene su encanto... ¡Sí, señor!... (*A Sebastián.*) No todo es hacer colas y comprar el pan por la libreta..." (17). Life in Cuba is notorious for being one in which people must wait in line: for the bus, for the bank, for food. These lines can sometimes last all day, something especially true during the Special Period when supplies were scarce. People would arrive early to wait and hope that they would reach the front of the line before it closed. Beatriz's use of choteo in this moment speaks to her acknowledgment of and resignation to the hardships faced on the island. While she may be unable to change her situation, she can make light of it through choteo.

Beatriz joins Felipe in his choteo of the system and the economic forces within the country, but she varies her choteo toward Sebastián as she chooses to target the man's individual qualities rather than his revolutionary characteristics. She begins by praising Luciano to her former lover and ends with calling Sebastián a know-it-all:

Beatriz. ¡Luciano, qué hombre! Tiene 43 años; pero, ¡qué hombre, Sebastián, qué hombre! Despierto, dormido, desnudo... Comoquiera está bien Luciano. (*Pausa.*) No es tan sabiondo como tú. Nadie es tan sabiondo como tú. (*Pausa prolongada.*) (15)

Beatriz's adoration for her most recent lover in front of a former lover is made worse by the fact that she follows it with a comparison to Sebastián, referring to him as a know-it-all. Being called a know-it-all is certainly not the worst thing, but when it follows a description of how wonderful another man is, it is both critical and humorous. Beatriz clearly indicates that Sebastián can, in no way, compete with Luciano with one word. By itself, *sabiondo* may not be enough to be considered choteo, but as their conversation continues, it becomes apparent that there is a

mocking tone established between both characters. However, Sebastián is less successful in his choteo than Beatriz: any of his attempts are simply laughed off by his former lover.

Sebastián and Beatriz know each other from their University days, but Beatriz left school before she finished. A conversation between the two about this earlier time in their lives leads to an attempt by Sebastián at choteo, which quickly falls apart as Beatriz refuses to become victim to his mockery:

Sebastián. No te graduaste porque no quisiste. Talento tenías, igual que Felipe. Si no terminaron, fue porque no quisieron.

Beatriz. (*Lo interrumpe.*) No, no... No quisiera estar en tu pellejo y mucho menos en el de Mayté. Tu trabajo es una basura y el de Mayté es una mierda.

Sebastián. Es mejor ser puta que abogada, ¿no?

Pausa.

Beatriz. (*Riendo estruendosamente.*) ¡Sebastián me llama puta en mi misma cara!... Hace rato que estabas loco por decírmelo. ¡Ay, Sebastián! Tú eres el único amigo extremista que yo tengo. ¿Por qué tú piensas que soy una puta? Conocí a un hombre que me gustó, me enamoré de él... Si es italiano, ¿qué culpa tengo yo? (18-19)

By immediately drawing attention to the fact that she understands that Sebastián has been waiting to call her a whore since he learned about Luciano, Beatriz thus negates any possibility of Sebastián successfully making her a target of his choteo. She simply laughs and turns the insult back at him instead:

Beatriz. (*Burlona.*) ¡Ay, mira al niño bueno! (*Acercándose a Sebastián más agresiva.*)
Ponte a pensar de qué coño te sirve tu inteligencia, de qué carajo te sirve tu cultura, de qué te vale tener una biblioteca entera en la cabeza. ¿A quién le importa eso? Te toca por la libreta lo mismo que a un vendedor de periódicos: un pancito diario, dos onzas de café a la quincena, una botella de bebida de pascua a San Juan... Tú repites de memoria los versos de Neruda; pero un limpiapisos de cualquier hotel gana más que tú, aunque tenga menos cerebro que un mosquito. ¿Y qué tiene Sebastián?: un título de abogado que seguro ya ni sabe dónde lo metió... Mientras tú das discursitos, hay quien se sirve el desayuno en una jarra con música. (20)

I consider this retort a form of cultural choteo in that the humor has been created for the audience. Although some audience members may feel too close to the situation to appreciate the choteo, humor is present in Beatriz's criticism and mockery of authority figures. There is, without a doubt, criticism of both the individual and the system in these words. When she questions the usefulness of Sebastián's law degree, Beatriz focuses on the fact that those who work in service jobs, such as washing floors, are likely to earn more money than he does working at his "honorable" job within the Revolutionary system. She reminds Sebastián that no matter what job or degree people have, their rations are all the same. This situation would presumably be relatable to many audience members, although, following McGraw's benign violation theory, it would most likely only be found funny by those who are less like Sebastián and more like the floor cleaners that Beatriz describes.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ It is unclear exactly who was in attendance for the performance of this play, however, it is probable that those with any extra income (i.e., those who earned convertible pesos) would be in the audience as they would have had the funds to spare for the tickets. Although tickets for Cuban theater performances are reasonably priced, the Special Period put an economic hardship on many members of the community.

This was the Cuban reality of the time: those employed in the service industry, especially serving foreign tourists, earned more money than their counterparts who worked within the Revolutionary system.¹¹⁶ Terry knew this and uses Beatriz and Felipe to demonstrate this reality. On the other hand, Terry creates Sebastián to represent the position of the authorities. While Sebastián himself is not an authority figure, his constant defense of the system, and his insults at those attempting to live outside of it, allow Terry to create a cultural choteo against these authorities.

The tension in the room builds as the two continue to argue. This time the tension is sexual as they each make suggestive comments to the other. Even though Sebastián is married, Beatriz acknowledges that they both knew that they would give in to their desire for one another from the moment that Felipe left them alone. Sebastián feebly attempts to deny this, briefly maintaining some of his formal and conservative self before giving in to his attraction for her:

Sebastián. (*Acariciándola con deseos.*) Felipe va a volver.

Beatriz. No abrimos la puerta.

Sebastián. (*Más excitado.*) La llave está allá afuera.

Beatriz. (*Mientras le abre la camisa.*) La llave está en la cama, cobardón.

Sebastián. Estás loca (*Pausa. Riendo.*) ¿Y cómo te pago: en dólares o en pesos cubanos?

Beatriz. (*Ríe. Después habla en un susurro.*) Nunca tuviste que pagarme y ahora tampoco te voy a cobrar.

Sebastián la estrecha fuertemente y la besa en los labios con dureza. (27-28)

¹¹⁶ This is still the case in present day Cuba, although the state has legalized some private enterprises such as the *casa particular* and the *paladares*, which allow for Cubans to earn Cuban Convertible Pesos (CUC) on top of their state incomes paid in traditional Cuban Pesos (CUP).

Here again, Sebastián attempts to use choteo with Beatriz. Even as he is about to sleep with her, he jokingly offers to pay for her services. He once again implies that she is prostituting herself. This comment is also suggestive of Sebastián's place in this new Cuba. Thus far, he has made a point to defend his position within the Revolution and to insinuate that those who work for dollars are below him. But here, in this moment, he stoops to that same level. He asks Beatriz how he should pay her in an attempt to make light of the situation. He acknowledges that he should pay her for her services in an effort to downplay any emotional attachment he may feel. Sebastián's comment serves as a defense as he allows himself to have sex with Beatriz. If he treats her as nothing more than a prostitute, then he may feel better about himself. While he may believe himself to be morally superior to her, he understands that she is financially above him. He does his best to maintain a supposed upper hand by focusing on Beatriz's profession rather than his attachment to her. But she is not offended. She even laughs at his comment and assures him that she does not expect any payment.

In the second act, when Sebastián asks her why she slept with him, Beatriz responds simply by saying, "porque tenía ganas, y si tengo ganas, no lo pienso dos veces..." (32). For her, it seems, it was nothing more than physical attraction and desire in the moment.

Their conversation soon turns toward food, as they continue to await Felipe's return. Beatriz mentions that while Sebastián was sleeping, she had attempted to buy some stolen pizzas from her neighbor. However, the woman's husband was home and he did not want her to sell anything for fear of retribution from the police. Sebastián comments that each and every day he finds more and more thieves in Havana. Beatriz explains that this is the new Cuban reality:

Beatriz. Tú no robas, Sebastián; pero hay otros qué sí lo están haciendo... y no son ni dos ni tres. No te pongas a arreglar el mundo, porque te vas a volver loco.

Sebastián. (*Abrasándola con efusividad.*) Tú eres la que me vas a volver loco. (*Se deja caer en la cama con Beatriz.*)

Beatriz. Oye, dile a tu mujer que te atienda. Te tocan una mano y empiezas a soltar chispas por la portañuela. (*Riendo.*) (34)

Beatriz proves once again that she is the master of choteo in this pairing. This particular choteo simply demonstrates the relaxation that Mañach addressed in his early works and that still exists in much of Cuban choteo. It also demonstrates Beatriz's lack of respect for the so-called sanctity of marriage. Her choteo is not only directed at Sebastián but also at the overall institution of marriage. Ilka Kressner asserts that in Cuban drama "besides being an act of intimate betrayal, infidelity is also understood as a political offense, since it infringes upon fundamental social and ethical agreements" (230). Beatriz's flippant perspective toward marriage reaffirms her position toward these social understandings. She holds no regard for marriage nor for the political, social, and ethical contracts under which it falls. She somehow manages to mock the unstable socio-economic and political situation in Cuba with her choteo against marriage.

The two continue their argument, each questioning the motivations and desires of the other. Sebastián argues that one cannot truly consider themselves a communist if they do not live with, and within, communism at all times. Beatriz claims he is simply jealous of those that can leave when he cannot. When she declares that he is blind to the world around him, he counters with his particular understanding of the Cuban situation stating, "Lo veo y lo oigo todo... ¿y qué? Si la Revolución se cae, vístete de lobo, que este país se va a convertir en una selva. Los

que caigan abajo, abajo se van a quedar” (37). Here he acknowledges that everyone simply fights for the best that they can. He understands that when the Revolution ends, those who fall will stay at the bottom. Sebastián’s insistence that the survival of Cuba depends on his (and other’s) faith in it is something that Beatriz does not comprehend because she does not feel the same attachment. This is where Terry demonstrates the dichotomy of the positions in Cuban society. Both positions exist and were prominent during this time. To ignore one or the other would be to worsen the situation.

Despite their differences, the two lovers plan a weekend escape together. Beatriz is intrigued by the possibility, but Sebastián is enthralled and even slightly disappointed when Felipe returns moments later. Felipe seems to take the middle ground in the argument the other two were having moments before. He understands that neither the capitalist nor the socialist system is perfect, and he chooses to simply accept that reality:

Felipe. Roma siempre será Roma; pero los jamones no llueven. Si no te rompes el lomo, te pasa la cuchilla por arriba. El Socialismo es el sistema de la ineficiencia; pero el Capitalismo tampoco es una papa suave. Si en este país un camarero te atiende mal, no pasa nada. Si un taxi no te quiere recoger, no pasa nada. Si las fábricas no cumplen el plan del año, no pasa nada. Si las tiendas están vacías, no pasa nada. Pero con ”los malos” el pastel tampoco es fácil: en un montón de calles de la misma Europa te puedes encontrar a una puta vieja y muerta de hambre, que a lo mejor se parece a tu madre o a la mía, y entonces no sabes si echarte a reír o echarte a llorar. ¿Con cuál sistema me quedo? Con ninguno de los dos. Cojo lo bueno que encuentre en cada uno y hago mi fiesta, sea

en Miami, en La Habana, en Buenos Aires... o en Burkina Faso. Lo que sí no puedo hacer es tratar de enderezar lo que otros jorobaron. (49)

This humorless explanation seems to defend why Felipe so often uses choteo in his daily life. He understands that no matter where he goes, he will be part of an imperfect system. He accepts this and explains that, for him, the only solution is to choose the best from each ideology and try to live his own life. He cannot fix other people's problems, but he can live a little better by combining elements of each system to benefit himself. Sebastián does not agree with his rationale, but acknowledges that Felipe is smarter than both he and Beatriz.

In life, certain situations evoke contrasting sentiments. There is a fine line between the benign and the violation in these moments in which one does not know whether to laugh or cry. In Felipe's case, he chooses to laugh in order not to cry, but he still recognizes the sadness in these situations, and, as Sebastián understands, Felipe actually comprehends these situations better than most. I expect that Felipe's position would have been the most recognizable to audiences, but it is often not acknowledged in the same way that the more extreme positions held by Beatriz and Sebastián are. Terry places these particular words in Felipe's mouth in what appears to be a critique of the Cuban situation. He uses Felipe's choteo to judge the Beatrices and Sebastián's of his country. If choteo is a tool, the choteador is the one impacting the situation. In this case, I imagine that Felipe's purpose as a character is to impact the audience with his logic regarding the two imperfect systems.

After Felipe describes his philosophical position, Sebastián asks Beatriz to bring more Pedro Domecq for their friend. This is followed by two back-to-back moments of choteo, one

directed at Beatriz and Sebastián, the other toward the failed Soviet state, and both provided by Felipe:

Felipe. (*Riendo.*) ¡Qué clase de número! (*Pausa. En un tono insinuante.*) Te veo contento. ¿Qué araña te habrá picado?

Beatriz. (*Que ya se dirige a la cocina.*) Voy a buscar el vaso, Sebastián. Y no tomes tanto, que te va a caer mal.

Felipe. (*Con una tosecita fingida.*) Bueno, bueno, bueno... Lo de la araña no fue con ella. (*A Beatriz, gritando.*) ¿Qué pasa con ese Pedro Domecq? (*Se tapa la boca para contener la risa.*)

Beatriz. (*En off, gritando.*) ¡Cállate, Felipe, cállate!

Felipe. (*A Sebastián, riendo.*) Oye, te voy a hacer un chistecito picante. Dime, ¿qué son las reformas de Boris Eltsin?

Sebastián. (*Encogiéndose de hombros.*) ¿Qué son?

Felipe. Una inyección de medicamento en una pierna de palo.

Los dos ríen estruendosamente. (50)

First, it appears that Felipe understands exactly what happened while he was not around, and he intends to hassle Beatriz about it. When Felipe asks Sebastián about which spider it was that bit him, he is clearly talking about sex. The spider is often symbolic of creative power and aggressiveness (Cirlot 46), and, as such, Felipe's comment infers that, perhaps, Beatriz has trapped Sebastián in her (figurative) web. Even when Felipe claims that the spider could not be Beatriz, he knows that it is. Felipe then changes the subject to share a joke with Sebastián. This

joke about a Soviet leader injecting medicine into a wooden leg is meant to critique the failure of Soviet communism. Both Felipe and Sebastián laugh at this joke suggesting that it is benign enough for Sebastián to see the humor. However, there is an underlying tone of choteo here directed at Cuban socialism as well. Even though the joke is delivered by Felipe, our choteador, the critique comes from Terry. He directs this cultural choteo at his audience, asking them to question the extremism in this degree of equality.

The tone of the play shifts when the phone rings. It is Beatriz's friend Dorys, explaining that Luciano has returned and is asking for her. Beatriz abandons everything else and decides that she must see Luciano. This upsets Sebastián immensely, and he grabs her to prevent her from leaving. Felipe laments that the mood has changed so drastically:

Felipe. ¡Coño, tan bien que la estábamos pasando! Luciano es amigo de mi suegro, pero tú eres amigo mío. (*Pausa.*) De todas formas, esto iba a pasar. Si no hubiera sido hoy, hubiera sido mañana, o la semana que viene. Ya este cuento me lo sé de memoria.

Quando Luciano habla, Beatriz se vuelve una cucaracha. (52)

This is the reality of the situation. Beatriz aligns herself with what is most convenient at the moment. For her, Luciano will always be the answer, whether for love or for money, or both. While Luciano is not around, however, Sebastián can fill that gap. When Sebastián realizes this, he is more upset that he was taken for a fool than surprised that Beatriz chose the Italian.

The play ends just as it begins, with the voice on the radio relating yet another story of failing socialism in other parts of the world. This time the discussion revolves around France and the power of money displacing the power of socialism. Once again, the subject of this criticism is

not Cuba, at least not directly. However, the words and actions of the three characters combined with the failings of other socialist nations imply that the playwright believes that Cuba will follow a similar path. The shift in the Cuban economy towards tourism shows that it has already begun. Cuban authorities may deny this correlation, but the characters in Terry's play illustrate that this is not true and that the changes will take place.

Choteo can reveal tensions among social, political, and economic sectors, and Beatriz, Felipe, and Sebastián are representative of the gaps between these sectors. The ways in which the three characters interact with one another and the humor they use (some more successfully than others) demonstrate the divide within society at this time. Hidalgo asserts that "el carácter inclusivo del choteo tiene un campo de significación mayor. Podemos, pues, inferir que el uso del choteo puede ser entendido como consecuencia lógica de factores sociales, políticos y culturales" (44). To this, I would add economic factors. All of these are interconnected, but the focus on the economic seems to be most prevalent during the Special Period. The collective understanding of the Cuban economic situation and the jokes that the characters make, both at their own and each other's expense, would connect audiences to the characters on the stage. Acknowledging their own situation would be a violation, but, as is demonstrated through the three character types on the stage, this violation would be benign enough to remain entertaining.

Laberinto de lobos shows multiple sides of the Cuban story. While Beatriz is quite critical of life and circumstances on the island, Terry presents another angle on the Cuban situation through Sebastián. Sebastián's defense of life on the island provides the perspective that because Cubans have survived during the Special Period and continue to receive basic healthcare, education, housing, and food the Revolution and socialism continue to be a success (Prizant, *Cuba Inside Out* 68). Terry creates a character like Sebastián to demonstrate that this is

not enough. Even Sebastián falls victim to certain capitalist trappings, including the Pedro Domecq and Beatriz, a woman he assumes he will have to pay for sex. Though Sebastián may praise the Cuban situation, the audience members, and even arguably Sebastián himself, recognize the many flaws present within these achievements. Felipe, the unlikely voice of reason, recognizes that capitalism too has many flaws. His perspective suggests that, perhaps, it is beneficial to combine the most desirable elements of the two systems.

While Beatriz pines for her Italian lover who might take her away from Cuba and Felipe is engaged to an Argentine woman who makes his life easier with her (and her father's) privileges as a foreigner, Sebastián insists that he will follow the Revolution and its ideals to the end. Prizant states, "Sebastian seems to have accepted his country's condition, even if he is somewhat defeated by it. Although he will not consider leaving the island, he does not propose any ways to fix its problems. Instead he fully acknowledges Cuba's shortcomings but also that he is inextricably tied to them, a vital part of them, all the while lamenting the future" (72).

Sebastián is not the only one who is frustrated. Each of these characters feels disappointment in their own way. The difference lies in how they each respond to this sentiment. Beatriz and Felipe both use choteo to cope with their feelings of defeat. Choteo serves as a form of escapism and therefore allows for a humoristic release from the world in which one lives. Sebastián does not easily incorporate choteo into his daily life and therefore is unable to experience that release. Beatriz is somewhat successful in her uses of choteo, though it is Felipe who is the master of this humor. Choteo is often used when one wishes to avoid a situation, but Felipe clearly acknowledges his circumstances. His humor seems less about recognizing the issues and more about resigning himself to them. His belittlement of the system does nothing to change his situation except allow him to live more freely than Sebastián. Prizant believes that Felipe "does

not attempt to solve any social ills, and he is more concerned with surviving in spite of them by finding clever ways to conquer obstacles. He is not concerned with any greater good or national mission, but he works to better only his own experience” (73). Without a doubt, these “clever ways” include using choteo to get through obstacles he cannot change.

Miguel Terry’s play provides one example of the shift in Revolutionary mentality and ideology for many Cubans during the 1990s. It clearly demonstrates transformations in the economic situation that affected many people, for better or for worse. It shares how people chose to cope with this unstable situation and it flawlessly incorporates choteo in order to do so.

Another play, written the same year, that further elaborates on this changing perspective in Cuba during the Special Period that incorporates choteo is *Vereda tropical* by Joaquín Miguel Cuartas Rodríguez. While *Laberinto de lobos* focuses on how these differences exist among friends, Cuartas Rodríguez’s play turns to the effects of these changes on the family unit.

Vereda tropical: Choteo, Change, and Generations

It is not surprising that many of the plays I have chosen for this project were staged for only a brief time, or not at all, considering their use of choteo to speak out against social, political, and economic situations. *Vereda tropical*, by Joaquín Miguel Cuartas Rodríguez is no exception.

Cuartas Rodríguez (1938-) was born in Lawton, Cuba, and continues to live there to this day. He attended the Seminario de Dramaturgia in 1962 and became a member of the Instituto Cubano de Radiofusión in 1967. While he has written a handful of plays,¹¹⁷ he is also known for his work with Radio Nacional. He has received the *Premio Caracol*, awarded by UNEAC, eight times,

¹¹⁷ *Los ángeles no son dogmáticos* (1962), *Llegó a la gloria la gente de los Santos Inocentes* (1965), *Descubriendo América* (radioteatro, 1989), and *Vereda tropical* (1994). (Cuartas Rodríguez second cover)

and has obtained numerous other awards for his writing and his radio work (Cuartas Rodríguez, *Biografía*).

Even though *Vereda tropical* won the Tirso de Molina Spanish theater award in 1994, and was published in Madrid in 1995, it has never been staged or published in Cuba. In her book, *Family and Identity in Contemporary Cuban and Puerto Rican Drama*, Camilla Stevens suggests that “it is possible that the play remains unstaged in Cuba because Cuartas does not work in a subsidized theater collective or because the play is simply too difficult to produce in Cuba’s current economic conditions, but its unperformed status might very well relate to the play’s portrait of the socialist family in decline” (195). I am inclined to agree with each of these reasons. *Vereda tropical* requires a seemingly elaborate set that would have been difficult to construct during the Special Period. If the production were not in some way subsidized, it could be near impossible to acquire the set requirements for this play. Even with a government subsidy, some of the materials would have still been difficult to obtain. If, somehow, Cuartas Rodríguez had been able to construct the set and stage the production, *Vereda tropical*’s content would have been considered unsupportive of the communist regime. Therefore, it is not surprising that the production has never been staged on the island.

This three-act play tells a story that takes place over the course of a week and a half. *Vereda tropical* relates the experiences of four generations of Cuban women and their life on the island during the Special Period. Bururú is a 58-year-old black woman fully dedicated to the Revolution and even anticipating a reward for her service. She lives in a tenement house with her mother, Engracia (80), her daughter, Caridad (38), and her granddaughter, Purita (20). Although Bururú is content to live within the Revolution, the same is not the case for the younger women. While Bururú constantly resists any changes from outside the Revolution, her daughter and

granddaughter actively seek them. Even her mother has considered moving out of the house and into a senior living center with her friend Florodora. The women live next door to an older man, Romualdito, and because of the tight quarters, they even share a bathroom with him. In the first act, Bururú and Caridad fight because of the younger woman's relationship with Pititi, the son of Bururú's former friend (now enemy), Gladis la Jabá. Gladis will soon return to Cuba from Miami for a visit, and this will cause Bururú further difficulties in fighting the inevitable changes taking place on the island. Throughout the three acts Bururú both dreams of a better life and tries to make the best of the one she has; still it seems that she may be forced to change the way she looks at life.

Although the author of *Vereda tropical* is not a woman, each of his main characters is. In fact, the men in this play have very minor roles. Cuartas Rodríguez's choice to focus on the women in this play seems quite intentional as is his portrayal of race. Prior to the Revolution, women did not have the same career advancement opportunities that they had by the time of this play. Bururú is a black woman and a highly decorated and honored member of the revolutionary community. Before the Revolution, she worked as a maid with little chance of leaving that life. Caridad's ability to earn a teaching degree would also have been less probable prior to the Revolution considering her condition as the illegitimate daughter of a white man and a black woman. And Purita would have been less likely to receive medical training without the Revolution. The achievements of these women show that a great deal of positive change has occurred since the Revolution. From this, one can assume that while Cuartas Rodríguez did not completely discredit the government, he was willing to acknowledge the substantial changes that had taken place in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, it is a critical piece as well, and Stevens believes that "*Vereda tropical* suggests that not only has the Revolution failed to

erase traces of the prerevolutionary family but that the new family, built over the foundation of the older model, is on shaky ground as well” (195). This can be seen in both the serious and the humorous moments of the play, but Cuartas Rodríguez is, I believe, more successful in delivering its message when he incorporates choteo to demonstrate these concerns.

The choteo in this play exists both between the characters and between the playwright and his audience. There are also moments in the stage directions that indicate a visual choteo that would likely be understood by an audience or reader. *Vereda tropical* demonstrates the changes that have taken place in Cuba through generational representations of what it means to live on the island during the special period. Each of the four women in this play represents a differing perspective on the importance of living a revolutionary life and what it means to live, survive, and potentially thrive during the Special Period in Cuba. Stevens explains that plays like *Vereda tropical* “portray the family in a much more fragile state than in earlier works. These later plays reveal the toll the Revolution has taken on the family unit and a turn toward familial self-sufficiency” (168). In order to create a play that successfully achieves this portrayal of the family, without discouraging audiences, Cuartas Rodríguez weaves elements of choteo throughout. This humor balances with the harsh reality represented in the text and (potentially) on the stage.

As Ariana Hernández-Reguant points out, “Writing during the Special Period entailed, more than ever, a double duty on the part of the writer: it involved expressing one’s own self vis-à-vis the overwhelming surrounding hardships as well as infusing the experience with universal appeal” (14). One way of doing this was to include choteo as part of the experience. The ability to write with choteo reemerged during the Special Period for a couple of reasons: first, the government focused more on the economic issues at hand; and second, there was a decrease in

subsidies allotted to theater groups, creating an increase in works by individual writers. Stevens contends that “Cuba’s profound domestic crisis –the Special Period– to some extent has forced government officials to be more lenient with critical interpretations of Cuban society because of the gap between the media’s ‘official’ representation of the situation and reality” (175). This leniency allowed for a critical element in plays written during this time. However, censorship still existed, and while Cuban officials may have become slightly more lenient, they still did not allow publication or production of works that spoke out against the Revolution. Choteo was used to straddle the line between permitted interpretations and direct criticism. Stevens continues by explaining that because of this leniency, and the fact that they were “less focused on direct communication and functionality, writers are freer to experiment with language and form and to write on topics not explicitly revolutionary” (175). This did not, however, mean that they were allowed to write “against” the Revolution, simply that the primary focus did not have to be the Revolution. The inclusion of choteo would not have been enough to overshadow the criticism present in *Vereda tropical* and, perhaps, even added to the lack of publication and production of the play.

Esther Suárez Durán confirms this assertion by stating, “El teatro [de los 90] exploró, entonces, la memoria, la condición insular, las esencias de la cubanía, desacralizó temas tabúes, vindicó la diferencia, ignoró contradicciones antes tenidas por centrales y volvió central aquello que se hallaba en los márgenes” (246). Perhaps it is because *Vereda tropical* undertakes each of these topics, rather than one or two of them, that it did not find success on the island. While I agree that the factors that Suárez Durán mentions are part of the issue, I will demonstrate that the way in which Cuartas Rodríguez merges choteo with these subjects was what may have restricted the circulation of this play.

As has been the case with some of the other works in this study, *Vereda tropical* demonstrates the first elements of choteo in its opening stage directions:

El mobiliario de la planta baja consta de: una mesa de comer redonda, cuatro sillas, un refrigerador, un televisor roto, un sillón que se encuentra tan atrapado que no puede moverse. (11)

And, further down the page:

Sobre toda esta estructura y destacándose aparece un letrero que dice: EL LUGAR DONDE SE VIVE. En el proscenio, al lado izquierdo del público. A continuación de lo descrito, sin puertas o tabiques que lo separen, como un apéndice natural, aparecen dos palmeras fosforescentes con una hamaca rosa colgada entre ellas. En su parte superior un letrero que dice: EL LUGAR DONDE SE SUEÑA. (11)

These short sections from the “Escenografía” demonstrate critical and humorous elements that will be integrated throughout the play. In the description of the furniture arrangement on the main floor of the house, the set directions indicate that there is a broken television and, presumably, notably so. It is later explained that it was damaged because it was plugged in as the electricity came back on after a power outage. The rocking chair, unable to rock due to lack of space, is an important indicator of the shortage of room in this home. There are four women who live here, and the area is very small. These elements are more than visual indicators of the living conditions of the family; they are representative of the homes of many Cubans at this time. These

circumstances may or may not be perceived as humorous depending on the individual; however, the cramped quarters may be intended to elicit laughter because of the audience's ability to identify with the particular conditions of the family.

The signs over the different areas of the living space are also clearly intended for the audience alone. The characters never acknowledge the signs, but rather than simply imply that these two different areas exist, Cuartas Rodríguez intentionally brings attention to these spaces. The signs emphasize reality-versus-fantasy for the characters, in particular Bururú, who is the only one who utilizes the "place where one dreams." These signs and spaces humorously and effectively demonstrate Bururú's discontent and frustration with her situation. She is unable to express her dissatisfaction openly, so she creates an alternate world in which she can dream about what she truly desires. Cuartas Rodríguez's creation of these spaces makes light of one's need to escape reality now and again.

The first act opens with Caridad entering the house with her boyfriend, Pititi. Admitting that Bururú would not approve, Caridad still insists that it is safe for him to enter the house because her mother will not be home for hours. Pititi's mother's decision to leave Cuba for the United States has turned Bururú against his entire family. After a brief moment of discomfort, Pititi observes the main room of the house and comments on how little it has changed in the fourteen years since he has been inside the house. He does note one exception to this, however:

Pititi. Esta pared estaba más vacía entonces. Oye, hay que ver que Bururú se ha ganado distinciones y reconocimientos en estos 14 años. Tu madre es una comecandela. Con tanta medalla, si se las pone encima y se tira al mar hasta el fondo, no para. (*Ríe.*)
Tremendo lastre. (Cuartas Rodríguez 14)

Although Pititi has a certain degree of fear of Bururú, once he feels comfortable inside the house, knowing that she is not there, he jokes about the numerous medals she has been awarded. Pititi's choteo about hanging them around the recipient's neck and throwing her to the bottom of the sea, in contrast with his initial apprehension in entering her home, shows that while he understands her authority, he does not respect it. He speaks of a burden in relation to those medals, and that burden is not just one of the physical weight of the medals, but also one that Bururú will carry in the newly emerging Cuba.

The two lovers soon retire to the bedroom that Caridad shares with her mother, daughter, and grandmother, comfortable in the assumption that no one will discover them. Naturally, Bururú is soon seen walking home with her friend, Adarcisa, as their combat training has been cancelled. These two women are fully dedicated to the Revolution, its ideals, and its mission. However, while Bururú maintains that nothing is changing, at least regarding the country's socialist ideals, Adarcisa is less than convinced:

Adarcisa. A veces pienso que después de tantos años de lucha todo se está haciendo sal y agua. Ya tú ves todas las empresas y corporaciones que se han inventado, ¡y como llaman a los capitalistas a invertir! Chica, ni las putas que existieron en el barrio de San Isidro llamaban tanto a los machos. (21)

Adarcisa is exasperated at the changes occurring. She criticizes those who fall victim to the siren call of capitalism by comparing the capitalists to the prostitutes who worked the San Isidro neighborhood prior to the Revolution. This line, while critical of the capitalists when spoken by

Adarcisa, would also be considered cultural choteo against the socialist system in that it acknowledges the successfully alluring call of the capitalist system for many Cubans.

Later, the subject of their conversation changes to Antolín, a widower and friend of the two women. Adarcisa insists that he is interested in Bururú, and when her friend replies that she is “de retiro,” Adarcisa responds by saying:

Adarcisa. Mija, una nunca está de retiro. Ramón se me murió hace cinco años y ¿sabes dónde más lo extraño? En la cama. (*Rien ambas. Adarcisa se cuadra como militar.*) Batallón, atención. De frente, march. Un, dos, tres, cuatro; un, dos, tres, cuatro; un, dos, tres, cuatro. (*Las dos marchan militarmente risueñas hasta llegar a la puerta de la casa de Bururú.*) (23)

In this moment, the choteo is multilayered. Adarcisa discusses her lack of sex life after the death of her husband with choteo. This choteo counters masculinist assumptions made about women and their need for men. Within the Revolution, Adarcisa does not need to rely on a man, but even she admits, there is one thing that the Revolution cannot do for her that her husband could. The critique of the system is not in her independence, it is in how she does not focus on love or companionship, but rather a woman’s need for a physical relationship, no matter her age. There is also cultural choteo in the visual of the two women, by themselves, marching home in military formation. The instant switch from casual conversation to military marching is humorous in that it would be considered completely unnecessary given the casual circumstances in which they find themselves. While the two women themselves do not mock authority figures, I consider

Cuartas Rodríguez's inclusion of this moment as one which demonstrates the extreme degree to which the two women consider themselves revolutionaries.

Bururú arrives at home and says goodbye to her friend. As she enters her house, she does not notice the activities in the bedroom (at least not initially), but instead goes directly to her dream place where she daydreams about receiving an upcoming award:

Padrón. Compañera Bururú.

Bururú. (*Emocionada.*) Sí, compañero Padrón.

Padrón. Llegó el día.

Bururú. ¿De veras?

Padrón. Lo que usted ha anhelado tanto, compañera Bururú. Lo que usted se merece.

Bururú. Yo no me merezco nada. Todo lo he hecho por la revolución. (*Melodramática y casi con lágrimas en los ojos.*) (24)

The choteo lies in the fact that this conversation takes place in Bururú's mind, and while she claims not to believe she deserves anything for her dedication to the Revolution, the mere existence of the daydream proves otherwise. The house that she envisions as a reward for her revolutionary deeds is not small and even has three bedrooms. Here I see Cuartas Rodríguez using choteo to critique revolutionaries that claim not to seek material recognition for their actions. As the play progresses, Bururú constantly castigates those who seek physical objects to better their lives, claiming that they should be satisfied serving the Revolution. But it is clear that even she is not immune to the appeal of certain material items. The choteo here only just masks a critique of hardline revolutionaries as it plays out in Bururú's daydream.

In fact, Bururú's fantasies continue to be a source of choteo throughout the remainder of the play. When she next returns to her dream space, she imagines her granddaughter's future successes as a doctor. She creates a world in which Purita has discovered a vaccine for the AIDS virus and is awarded the Nobel Prize in Medicine. Upon hearing this (in her dream world), Bururú cannot hold back her pride:

Bururú. Purita, mi nieta, salvaste a Cuba. Mija, salimos del período especial gracias a ti. Ya no necesitaremos los dólares de la gusanera. Ya no van a dejar venir a Cuba a Gladis la Jabá. (*Purita se retira. Bururú queda sola en la hamaca, meciéndose con alegría.*) (35)

While Bururú is proud of her granddaughter's future achievements as she envisions them, she focuses more on how those achievements will help Cuba than on her granddaughter herself. This choteo is for the audience. Through dramatic irony, the audience can assume (or at least suspect) that many of these dreams will not come true. This alone could cause laughter, but what makes it choteo, and more than just humorous dramatic irony, is the critique of Bururú, the great revolutionary of the play.

Not all the blame, however, is reserved for Bururú and her belief in these daydreams. The Revolution is also at fault as it has built a system that has allowed her the belief that her merits will be rewarded if only she continues to work hard. This is the criticism, and the choteo is found in how the failure of those dreams to come true is repeatedly presented throughout the play. Toward the end of the first act, Bururú returns once again to her dream place and imagines that her daughter renounces Pititi to live her life according to Bururú's wishes. Though her revolutionary activities appear to satisfy her on the surface, Bururú is only ever truly happy in

her dream space. But this is not a space of *reality*, and both she and the audience are reminded of this as the act closes out and, due to a power outage, Bururú trips over a chair and breaks her leg.

The second act, set one week later, introduces Engracia's friend Florodora, who has come to visit. Florodora brings a lighthearted element to the story, speaking about why and how she came to visit the family in Old Havana, but she also represents a perspective of the older generation that is different than Engracia's. She asks Bururú if having the cast has been much of a bother, and when the younger woman answers in the affirmative, noting the work that she has been unable to do for the Revolution during the past week, Florodora laughs and says, "Esta hija tuya siempre ha sido un cohete, Engracia" (67). While this is likely a lighthearted, affectionate form of humor directed at Bururú's dedication to the Revolution, it could also be considered choteo. It seems as though even the older generation, those whose children were already adults before the Revolution, do not feel as committed to the actions of the Revolution as those in Bururú's age group. It is not that Florodora believes that the Revolution has failed necessarily but simply that, at her age, she understands that it is now in the hands of the younger generations. She both praises and mildly mocks Bururú for her zealous dedication to so many facets of the revolutionary lifestyle. Florodora has retired, content in knowing that she has served her country and has earned the minor comforts afforded her in the senior home where she now resides.

Later, as Bururú gives a speech in honor of the nineteenth-century Cuban educator and philosopher Don José de la Luz y Caballero, arguably the single most choteo-filled moment occurs. As was the case with the opening set of the play, this choteo is primarily visual. Gladis la Jabá, Pititi's mother and Bururú's rival, returns from Miami. The stage directions from this scene are as follows:

Vuelven a escucharse los aplausos, mas también una conguita alejada que se va haciendo cercana. Todos miran, extrañados, al fondo del foro. (74)

And:

La conguita se va haciendo más fuerte. Del fondo de la parte izquierda del foro sale el personaje de Gladis la Jabá. El tratamiento al personaje es por completo de farsa. Su vestido está hecho de pequeñas banderas norteamericanas y de letreros que dicen: "Made in USA". Frente a ella dos abanderados uniformados llevan estandartes que agitan al ritmo de la conga. En cada estandarte dorado se destaca el símbolo del dólar (\$). Tras Gladis la Jabá una cohorte formada por ocho botones, cuatro a cada lado, llevando cada uno dos maletas. Los botones y abanderados marcan el ritmo, mientras cantan. (74-75)

And:

Todos han quedado paralizados por el asombro. El cortejo de Gladis la Jabá va pasando y termina por situarse al extremo derecho. Separado del sitio donde se encuentra Bururú y los cederistas por una especie de tierra de nadie. Los botones oficiosos colocan una maleta encima de la otra hasta hacer con tres una tribuna donde suben a Gladis la Jabá. Como pedestal. (75)

And finally:

Los botones abren dos de las maletas de golpe. El escenario se oscurece por completo de inmediato. Se llena como de fantásticas luces de colores y fuegos de artificio. Anuncios maravillosos parecen centellejar por todas partes, ofreciendo autos y MacDonaldis, así como Coca-Cola, mientras una música estruendosa de Heavy Rock y música pop llena todo. Esto dura unos instantes. Cuando todo vuelve a la normalidad, los cederistas, que han aceptado estar presentes en el develamiento del busto, están como hipnotizados mirando a Gladis la Jabá, que, ayudada por los Botones, ya baja del estrado formado por sus maletas y comienza de nuevo su marcha, retirándose por el fondo del foro. Botones y Abanderados repiten la conga ya conocida. Parte de los cederistas la van siguiendo con lentitud marcando el compás hasta que logran agarrarlo. Bururú se les aproxima, los sacude tratando de sacarlos del sortilegio. (76)

By this point, the audience is already well-aware of how Bururú feels about her rival, and the fact that Gladis enters the scene for the first (and only) time in this manner is complete and utter choteo toward the perceptions of many on the island of those who return to Cuba from the United States. Stevens has commented on this scene suggesting that “given Bururú’s inclination for fantasies, it is unlikely that the rest of the crowd sees the same splashy scene she did” (239). Regardless of whether this scene was witnessed in the same way by each individual present at the unveiling ceremony, it is still a clear example of choteo. Here the playwright appears critical of both Americans and capitalism in general and of Bururú and her perspectives on the impact and implications of Gladis’s return. These stage directions reveal that those deeply entrenched in

the ways of the Revolution perceive life in the United States as one filled with abundance and flash.

The details provided about this moment mock both the capitalist and socialist systems. Although, on the surface, it may seem as though this description only pokes fun at the United States and Cuban-Americans, there is a critique of both sides here. The first visual provided is the conga line. This, in contrast to the solemn commemoration taking place with Bururú and her comrades, mocks the seriousness of the unveiling ceremony. This carnival dance stands in stark contrast to the revolutionary ideals Bururú describes. The appearance of Gladis and her followers discredits the Revolutionary culture. But the choice of the conga as a way of moving from one point to another can be associated with disorder, lack of discipline, and irresponsibility. This would be Bururú's perspective of her enemy, as she watches Gladis interrupt the scene.

Gladis's dress, decorated with American flags and reading "Made in USA," mocks the supposed greatness of Cuban socialism at this time. The sixteen suitcases she has with her, and the contents of that luggage, draw attention to the resources available outside of Cuba but not on the island. This is the Special Period. Material goods are hard to come by, so the fact that when the bellhops begin to open her suitcases, the representations are of supplies from outside of Cuba, is no coincidence. It is not that these items are even in her suitcase, necessarily. Instead the scene goes dark and there are flashing lights and fireworks accompanied by rock music and ads for cars, McDonalds, and Coca-Cola – another indicator that, perhaps, this is all in Bururú's head. The choteo is no longer only directed at capitalism and the United States. Instead, Cuartas Rodríguez also provides a source of humor that belittles the requirements and constraints of the revolutionary system, at least in how it functioned during the Special Period. This scene

effectively demonstrates discontent and frustration with the system while simultaneously mocking the outsiders.¹¹⁸

When Bururú asks those around her if they saw what she saw, they all insist that they did. However, though most of those present for Gladis's spectacle are able to go home and presumably forget about it, Bururú seems to be greatly affected by her former friend's return. She retires to her dream place at home and imagines confronting Gladis, who begs Bururú for forgiveness. Instead of pardoning her, Bururú refuses and seemingly takes satisfaction in her superiority over her rival.

The next brief moment of choteo comes as Engracia arrives home from visiting their next-door neighbor, Romualdito, and insists that he is not well. While she is worried that it may be something serious, Bururú suggests that it may just be gas:

Bururú. Pueden ser gases. Con la de chícharos que están dando ahora. A mí a veces me pasa.

Engracia. Eso le dije, pero, hija, es que no hay ni anís estrellao pa' hacerle un cocimiento, ni tampoco gotas antiespasmódicas, las farmacias están pelás.

Bururú. Es el bloqueo, hay que resistir. ¿Se tomó el café? (80-81)

¹¹⁸ *Milk of Amnesia*, written by Cuban-American performer and playwright Alina Troyano (stage name, Carmelita Tropicana) is another play that uses choteo to demonstrate a dissatisfaction with the Cuban situation of the 1990s. Through the character of Pingalito, an older Cuban exile, Troyano "simultaneously represents and challenges mainstream culture" (Solórzano-Thompson 85) both on and off the island. She demonstrates how outsiders such as Pingalito live in their memories, thereby distorting their perceptions of reality. Pingalito, like Bururú, is satisfied with his memories and the mental image of Cuba he has created for himself. Carmelita, like those of the younger generations in Cuba, must find her own answer through direct experience. In addition to this particular overlap with *Vereda tropical*, *Milk of Amnesia* has similarities to *Manteca* in that both plays involve a pet pig that must be slaughtered for survival. Although Troyano's play was written in the United States, these parallels suggest similar issues being addressed with choteo by Cuban playwrights both in Cuba and in the diaspora.

Engracia laments that there is no medicine to give their neighbor even if his problem is only gas. Bururú response places blame on the *bloqueo*. She is undoubtedly speaking about the forced embargo by the United States and Cuba's inability to import the necessary medicines for their citizens. But this is also a pun. Bururú has just stated that she believes that Romualdito may have gas, and in that regard, *bloqueo* could be a reference to his digestive state.¹¹⁹ He may just have to tough it out and drink coffee to help move things along.

The conversation between mother and daughter eventually moves to the subject of Antolín, who is supposedly coming that evening to profess his love for Bururú. Engracia encourages her daughter to look her best for her suitor:

Engracia. (*Desde la barbacoa.*) ¿Te vas a poner el vestido rojo?

Bururú. ¿El rojo?

Engracia. (*Desde la barbacoa.*) Es el mejor para hacer que el toro le venga a una encima.

Bururú. (*Riendo a su pesar.*) Está bien, mamá. El rojo. (*Engracia arriba escoge el vestido del escaparate y baja.*) (87)

This seemingly light comedy between the two women incorporates choteo as it compares trying to get a man to bullfighting. It is choteo that reflects a certain relaxation from the stressful events earlier in the day but also mocks men for being so easy to seduce. Antolín has become the target of the choteo, although it is choteo in one of its most harmless forms, because it is unlikely that Bururú will pursue him with determination. However, in the end, the joke is on Bururú. Antolín

¹¹⁹ Pérez Firmat insists that “choteo is often scatological” in nature, thus confirming that this play on words would be plausible (*Literature and Liminality* 66).

is interested in a relationship not with her but rather with Adarcisa, and he has come to Bururú to ask for help in communicating that to her friend.

Just as the first act ended tragically, so too does the second. After Antolín leaves, there is another blackout. This time it is Romualdito who falls in his apartment and, as a result of dropping or knocking over a lantern, starts a fire and destroys his apartment along with the bathroom he shares with the four women.

The final act takes place only three days after the second, on Ash Wednesday. This specific choice of a day is meaningful on two levels. First, and most obviously, the bathroom is in ashes after the fire. Bururú was able to free Romuladito from the fire and have him brought to the hospital, but he did not survive. Second, it is in this act that God reappears as a figure in the women's lives. Bururú struggles with this since, for the last thirty-five years, she has been told that God did not exist. At the same time, however, she sees how the presence of God is being reintegrated into Cuba and Cuban life.

Early on in the third act, when Bururú and Engracia are not home, Pititi arrives at the house to talk to Caridad and insists on entering the house to deliver gifts to her. He does this as an excuse to be physically close to her, as he has not seen her for two days. He informs her that he has something in his pocket that he wants to show her:

Pititi. Adivina lo que tengo aquí.

Caridad. ¿Ahí?

Pititi. Es algo chiquito, pero grande al mismo tiempo.

Caridad. ¿Chiquito y grande? No me vayas a soltar una indecencia.

Pititi. No, chica, no. (*Ríe.*) (103-104)

There is choteo in this sexual innuendo, but it is harmless, as can be determined by Pititi's reaction. Caridad plays off his earlier advances when she first let him into the house. Instead, he presents her with the key to an apartment that his mother bought for him. This interaction shows strength in their relationship, because he is not easily offended by her implication that he may or may not be well-endowed. While most examples of choteo throughout this play serve a greater purpose than simple mockery, this is an example of a harmless form of choteo between two lovers.

Pititi presents Caridad with new clothing and shoes that his mother has bought for her and her daughter and leaves shortly after. The scene cuts to Bururú and Adarcisa returning home from Romualdito's *velorio*. Among their topics of discussion is Antolín. Bururú asks her friend about the widow, who has since professed his love to her. Adarcisa laughs, indicating her thoughts on the situation, as the two women discuss his behavior at the wake:

Bururú. Se te parqueó al lado en la funeraria. No se movió de tu lado un instante.

Tremendo palique que te dio.

Adarcisa. Si fuera sólo el palique. Me leyó tres de sus poemas. No uno ni dos. Tres. Y me dijo que eran 575.

Bururú. (*Risueña.*) Sí, 575.

Adarcisa. ¿Tú sabes lo que le dije? Óigame, Antolín, estos poemas no son para mí, son para un concurso de poesía, concurse, seguro que se lleva el premio. (*Ríe corto.*)

Bururú. ¡Adarcisa! (110)

It could be argued that Adarcisa says these things in sensitivity to her friend's recent rejection by the same man. However, it is more likely that Adarcisa is truly not romantically interested in Antolín and is trying to push him away with her commentary about his poetry. Instead of fawning over his words, she suggests that he submit his poetry to a contest. She does not discourage his work as a poet, but at the same time she does not encourage him to pursue her any longer. Her choteo here could serve to reduce Antolín and discredit his work, but it seems more likely that it is choteo in support of her friend, Bururú. She chooses to reject his affections in favor of her friend.

After the funeral, Adarcisa and Antolín accompany Engracia back to her house. Bururú has gone to her award ceremony, where she believes she will be presented with the key to a new apartment. By this point, the audience should have enough information to recognize that Bururú will not be rewarded with a new apartment, as she has let herself, and everyone around her, believe. The choteo in this, while non-existent between the characters, exists on a more cultural level. The reality is that few Cubans are rewarded with something so large at that time, no matter how much work they have done. There simply were no extra houses. No new houses were being built and those that existed were already overcrowded.

Engracia arrives at home to find her granddaughter and great-granddaughter preparing to go out for the day. The two younger women have invented a story as to where they will be and why they will not arrive home until late. They will, in fact, be meeting with Pititi and his mother, though they do not wish for Engracia, and particularly Bururú, to know the truth.

However, their secret does not last long. As the two younger women return home that evening, they realize that Bururú has discovered the gifts from Gladis. The two younger women are finally honest with Bururú regarding their happiness and their lives in the small apartment.

Purita even confesses her plan to drop out of medical school and instead find work in a hotel. Bururú is furious and blames Caridad for convincing her daughter to leave such an honorable profession. Purita insists that this decision is hers and defends her choice when her grandmother (a former maid herself) contends that it is not the same to work in a hotel as to be a doctor. She retorts with, “Es verdad, abuela, no es lo mismo. Una profesional suelta el piojo y lo que gana no le alcanza ni para un ajustador. La empleada de un hotel come bien y con las propinas se viste mucho mejor que la profesional” (129-30). This statement may not be humorous, but it is an important declaration and one that critically considers the socialist system. There is little amusing in the idea that Purita could earn more and better provide for herself and her family by working as a hotel employee than as a doctor. If anything, there is a sadness in Purita’s comment along with a resignation to her difficult reality. As Hannah Elinson explains,

During the Special Period, it became apparent that many young people had previously become professionals in order to realize their material goals. Given the scarcity of goods and services available on a peso salary, many no longer found professional positions attractive. Because more than half of Cuba’s population was born after the 1959 Revolution, a change in the younger generation’s behavior is significant for Cuban society as whole (3).

Purita’s behavior reflects this reality, when she declares that she only decided to follow a professional career path for her grandmother’s sake. It is difficult to find humor in her situation as she is simply trying to survive.

Vereda tropical, like many of the plays in this study, ends on a somewhat tragic note. Caridad and Purita leave the house, presumably to return to Pititi's new apartment. They will return for their belongings at a later date. Bururú is understandably distressed by this turn of events and seeks someone or something to blame. When Engracia insists that it is impossible to place blame, Bururú confesses that she has, up to this point, always placed her faith in dreams. In her frustration, Bururú destroys her dream place, claiming, "Los sueños. En este país ya no hay sueños" (132). To this, her mother simply replies "¡Ay, Bururú! Y ¿quién te dijo a ti, hija, que un país vive de sueños? Vive de realidades, y las realidades siempre son duras" (132). After three choteo-filled acts, this is the final message. The notion that, for too long, the Cuban people have tried to survive on dreams is more than apparent in this moment. Engracia realizes this, as do Caridad and Purita who actively take steps to change their situations; Bururú, however, is just beginning to recognize this, and she is at a loss of how to handle this reality. Her generation has sustained itself on dreams for many years and realizing that dreams do not always come true is a hard pill for her to swallow.

Engracia, the wise matriarch, understands that sometimes things need to be shook up to improve, explaining to her daughter, "A veces en las familias tienen que pasar cosas así. Las familias son como los países, que de vez en cuando necesitan de un sacudión" (134). While the play itself incorporates choteo throughout, and the playwright uses choteo with the audience to get his message across, it is with these solemn notes at the end of the play that Cuartas Rodríguez makes what I consider to be the main point: that things must *change* in order to improve. The country, just like the family in this play, needs to break with the past to make improvements and survive into the twenty-first century. This correlates with McGraw's belief that in order to successfully convey a message one must "start with attention-grabbing jokes, then put all kidding

aside and make your point” (54). Comedy allows a playwright to draw in the audience to a message. With an audience’s investment in the humor, they will be more likely to walk away with the serious message and potentially use that message to initiate change.

Again, however, there is no record that this play was ever performed or published in Cuba, and few people seem to have discussed it at all. Stevens claims that “the prize-winning play’s failure to generate interest suggests that... perhaps Cuban officials found that *Vereda tropical* did not maintain a sharp enough contrast between past and present national families” (203). While this may be part of the reason, I do not think it is the complete reason. The critique of the socialist and revolutionary system, and, as part of that, the humor directed at both the individuals who are deeply entrenched in the system and the government as a whole, is the reason for the play’s lack of distribution on the island. When that target is the government, it is easy to make the correlation between the play’s perceived message by authorities and the censorship and prohibition of the work.

By using four generations of women to show the changing face of the Cuban economic situation, Cuartas Rodríguez succeeds in his criticism of that situation. While characters in their sixties advocate revolutionary ideals, those in the younger generations question the circumstances in which they live. The Revolution is aging and those that were born into it do not uphold the same vision for Cuba that those who came before them did. Their understanding of the world around them requires a different attitude toward daily life. The playwright incorporates choteo into this critique to better relay that message. Bururú’s humorous fantasies about those around her are reflective of the Cuban government’s perspectives on the Cuban population. The authorities believe that the people are understanding and accepting of the current circumstances, just as our protagonist does with her family members. But, like Bururú, they too live in a dream

world in which they do not fully understand the *individuals*' realities. Bururú's dreams for herself and her family reflect the gap between fantasy and reality that also exists for the government during the Special Period.

Conclusion: Choteo and Economic Survival

McGraw insists that "the secret... is understanding that in comedy, emotional attachment is key. To make a joke more or less funny, you can make the violation involved more or less benign by shifting the psychological distance between the violation and the person perceiving it" (60). In *Manteca*, *Laberinto de lobos*, and *Vereda tropical* there is an apparent emotional attachment that could be made with the characters; however, there is a distance that can also be maintained between audience members and the characters. Spectators or readers will recognize these characters from their actual lives, but they are removed enough to not consider themselves similar to the characters on stage. This psychological distance between the audience and the representative types presented is what allows the choteo in these very relatable situations to remain humorous to spectators. However, when the target is the government or authority figures in general, as is so often the case in these plays, leadership's ability to separate itself from the violation is seemingly more difficult. This may account for the censorship or lack of performances and/or publication of each of these plays. While *Manteca* is one of the most famous plays from the Special Period, it still faced production difficulties on the island. During the Special Period, there were many electrical blackouts (as demonstrated in *Vereda tropical*) which would have impacted performances. *Laberinto de lobos* and *Vereda tropical*, on the other hand, have little to no record of performances on the island. This may indicate that any potential performances were blocked. Both of these plays were award winning (*Laberinto de lobos* –

Pinos Nuevos, 1994; *Vereda tropical* Tirso de Molina, 1994), which suggests they were recognized for their quality, but, with little exception, they have not been witnessed or read by Cuban audiences. The economic precarity of the period influenced to what degree published works could be printed. With a limited paper supply, and a poor quality one at that, few titles were produced on the island or in large numbers during that time. While it seems apparent that one of the contributing factors to lack of distribution of these works is from Cuban authority figures that were unable to separate the critique of the Cuban situation from the humor in these plays, there were other *financial* factors at play as well.

Yael Prizant believes that “theatre is not merely a substitute for activity but serves as opposition when direct offensives are impossible” (25). I would agree with this statement but add that the success of this opposition relies heavily on the balance between subtlety and speaking out. It is impossible to know, but perhaps if these works had more exposure in Cuba at the time they were written, they may have initiated conversation about how to change the Cuban situation. It is illegal in Cuba to strike or protest the government, but that indicates little about the opposition that does exist. These three plays speak out against how the government handled the economic situation of the Special Period, and, for that, publication and performances were greatly restricted. As a result, the message of creating and encouraging change was not as successful as it could have been.

The economic changes of the 1990s did, however, allow for the loosening of certain regulations and provided writers and artists with a seemingly less stringent approach to censorship than had previously existed. As Linda S. Howe explains, “Sensing that the critical situation had loosened the authorities’ grip, the culturally ‘enfranchised’ (show-business people, artists, literati) responded with deliberate and unrestrained chastisement. Literature, dance, art,

and theater revealed much that had been restrictive, abusive, and erroneous about the revolution” (44). The ability to critique (although perhaps not to criticize) the system appeared to open up during the 1990s; however, this flexibility was not without exception as many works were still censored or restricted. The previously seen revolutionary rhetoric in Cuban theater seemed to decrease after the fall of the Soviet Bloc, and newer works often emphasized the disillusionment experienced by various artists and writers (Howe 3). While many playwrights had been hesitant to take risks during the earlier years of the Revolution, they now wrote more freely. As Howe continues:

Some examples of plays staged in the 1990s provide insight into how the playwrights realistically described contemporary Cuban society’s most complex problems and obsessions. Artists conveyed visions of social indignity with audacious creativity. The plays’ protagonists’ personal circumstances reflect the nation’s economic and ideological predicaments, which are constantly placed in contrasted [*sic*] with idyllic revolutionary fervor; hysteria and anarchy are placed in contrast with the stifling ranting of the political old guard. The result is chilling; the audience witnesses the unraveling of the social fabric; the mordant perspectives epitomize a ragtag tarnished, semimoribund Cuba. (45)

Included among this “audacious creativity” would be the incorporation of choteo into these works as a way in which to offer contrasting perspectives. By using humor to present these issues, playwrights might be able to hide behind the humor as they criticized what was occurring in their country. Celestino in *Manteca*, Sebastián in *Laberinto de lobos*, and Bururú in *Vereda tropical* all represent the “political old guard” of which Howe writes. In each of these stories

these characters resist change. Their determination to live within the revolutionary constraints that have been in place for, at that point, over thirty years contrasts with the need to move forward. It is not that the Revolution should be eliminated, but rather that the Revolution must adapt and change with the passage of time.

While some changes took place in the early years of the decade, they were often insufficient as was evidenced by the lack of material goods available to the Cuban people. The precarity of the economic situation influenced the ability to make some of the seemingly necessary changes in Cuba. Traditional proponents of the Revolution believed that they must simply forge onward and battle through the difficult times, but the playwrights whose work is examined in this chapter do not appear to consider that a satisfactory response. They incorporate choteo directed at these particular characters. Thus, when the audience laughs at Celestino, Sebastián, or Bururú, they understand that these characters are out of touch with reality. There is humor in their actions and in how they approach certain situations, but it is also evident that this type of individual is part of the problem impeding progress in Cuba. Cuban authorities certainly did not advocate this criticism, even if it was thinly veiled in humor, and, as such, the works in question were often censored.

As Ariana Hernández-Reguant maintains, “Writing during the Special Period entailed, more than ever, a double duty on the part of the writer: it involved expressing one’s own self vis-à-vis the overwhelming surrounding hardships as well as infusing the experience with universal appeal” (14). This ability to express one’s own self was newly reemerging during the time. It had been restricted for many years, at least if the message contrasted in any way with the official government agenda. In order to balance self-expression with universal appeal, some playwrights chose to incorporate choteo into their works.

Not all Cubans consider these plays reflective of the reality that surrounded them, and that is natural considering the differing experiences of individuals within any nation. In a 1995 interview with Bárbara Rivero, Cuban author and artistic director Bebo Ruiz states that he believes that “el problema del teatro cubano en nuestros días es ético y no estético, porque no ha alcanzado la condición de ser el espejo de la población” (72). Considering the three plays studied in this chapter, I would have to disagree with this statement, at least to a certain degree. Although it is true that these plays focus on individuals, the individuals illustrate types. These types, albeit exaggerations for comedic effect, are representative of Cubans and the Cuban situation. While perhaps Ruiz does not relate to the characters of Special Period plays, many people may see themselves and others in what is represented on stage or in the text. Ruiz continues, arguing that, “nosotros no tenemos en este momento nada que haya sustituido [*sic*] al teatro vernáculo, creo que es el principal agujero del movimiento teatral cubano. En cambio, a veces vamos a puestas en escena de las que yo digo: ‘está muy bien, pero es para que la vean los suizos o los suecos’” (72). Here, I understand Ruiz’s argument. In many cases, the realities portrayed in these plays may be too obvious for the audiences. Ruiz believes that these plays are written more to teach the rest of the world about Cuba rather than to teach Cuba about itself. I understand this perspective but I do not believe that it is complete. Although it may be important for outsiders to understand the Cuban situation, I postulate that playwrights include the various types that they do, along with choteo, in order to present Cuban audiences with exaggerations of their own reality. The plays may have been controversial or less than successful in terms of stage representations in Cuba, however, I would consider this part of the problem. Perhaps the plays that Ruiz refers to in his interview are not those discussed in this study. Considering that there is little evidence of performances of two of the texts, this is probable. Maybe what Ruiz criticizes are the plays that

were not censored, the plays that were allowed to be staged because they fell in line with the political agenda. Ruiz never provides titles to illustrate his argument so it is possible that he does not see the Cuban people reflected in the staged works, because they do not reflect the changes that occurred in the country over the previous decades.

As a result of the many changes that took place during the Special Period, especially in the economic sphere, the Cuban government decided to develop the tourism market to help aid the economy in these difficult times. However, this caused yet another rift within Cuban society as many spoke out against the “decadent, consumerist, and hedonistic character of tourism in the midst of the austerity, scarcity, and privations of the Special Period” (Fernández 83). This attitude is reflected in the plays studied in this chapter. It is evident to me that the choteo used in these works, along with the critical commentary of the economic situation in Cuba, reflects the growing distrust for the revolutionary system and the economic situation. At best, it brings attention to these issues in an attempt to invoke change. At worst, it reflects the resignation apparent in society at large. However, I contend that these plays were written not simply to reflect the reality of the time but rather to draw attention to the issues at hand and open the door to a conversation that would incite change.

The most difficult years of the Special Period took place during the first half of the 1990s. This by no means indicates that the economic situation was repaired in Cuba at this time, but simply that there had been enough change to ease the worst suffering. As de la Campa states, “A new era had obviously set in after ‘the special period.’ It was clear that there was widespread economic hardship, but it was evident to me that there was also an undeclared post-socialist culture quite different from anything I had seen before” (131). What does that cultural shift mean for choteo then? Would there still be a place for choteo as Cuba moved into the twenty-first

century? While the economic situation may be slightly alleviated by the ability to earn money outside of state employment, it is far from over. As I will demonstrate in the conclusion, there is plenty of reason for choteo to continue to appear in the theater and other performances in Cuba. What would be the theme of this recent choteo? I would argue that it has to do with tourism and in that sense is still connected to the choteo of the early years of the Special Period.

Conclusion: Choteo – Past, Present, and Future

Dentro y fuera de la isla el choteo ha sido asimilado por escritores, artistas, músicos e ilustradores hasta formar parte del sentir cubano y convertirse en una herramienta estética irreverente y en ocasiones antijerárquica, que ... está presente en la literatura, en la pintura, en las publicaciones periódicas y en la música. (Hidalgo, *Irreverencia y humor* 35)

What Is the Importance of Intellectual Choteo in the Theater?

In a 2015 interview with Virgen Gutiérrez, Cuban playwright Nicolás Dorr expressed his concerns about how playwrights in Cuba are often ignored when it comes to considerations of Cuban Literature.¹²⁰ It seems that, perhaps, because theater is a visual literature as well as a written one, it somehow does not deserve the same degree of attention and respect. I wholeheartedly share Dorr's concern, and recognize the way this mindset is reflected in recent studies on choteo in literature. Hidalgo, and even to a certain degree Pérez Firmat, take their examination of the humor farther than Mañach ever imagined, although they do not focus in detail on any of the theatrical applications of choteo. This lack of consideration for choteo in the theater is intriguing because I see choteo as something that pertains even more to the theater than to other forms of art and literature. While prose literature and journalism are meant to be read, and many forms of art are exclusively visual, theater can appeal to all of the senses.

¹²⁰ “A los dramaturgos aquí en Cuba, por lo general, no los consideran escritores, porque cuando se convoca a un evento sobre Literatura Cubana se habla de narrativa, de poesía y de ensayo... El drama, al parecer no existe [...] Esto es alarmante y manifiesta ignorancia o mala intención. No sé.” (Dorr, “Yo quiero” 46)

As I have attempted to show in this study, choteo in the theater, specifically that used in plays written during moments of great change in twentieth-century Cuba, serves a greater purpose than simply making the spectator or reader laugh. It has been my intention not only to discuss the myriad examples of choteo in certain Cuban plays, but also to explain its function in these works. Humor is a way to cover up the sorrow or frustration over the inability to change one's situation. McGraw goes as far as to suggest that "it's almost as if making people laugh during dark and troubling times is so vital, so crucial, that it overrides common sense, and maybe even self-preservation" (155). This is one way to consider the playwrights in this study. Each of the periods of focus in this study revolves around moments of turmoil and change in Cuba. While some of these moments may be considered more severe than others, the changing circumstances could, overall, be regarded as troubling.

Humor is a social force, and choteo is Cuba's version of that force. Perhaps this is why its use in the theater has often been censored. Though many countries have their own version of humor as a social force,¹²¹ choteo is unique to the Cuban situation. When people engage in choteo they attempt to express a certain degree of freedom from authority figures. Whether this freedom is real or imagined is of little importance to the choteador; the priority lies in the feeling that one has subverted authority. Bergson insists that laughter "indicates a slight revolt on the surface of social life" (200). Choteo attempts to incite this laughter and when it is successful in doing so, especially in a setting such as the theater, the revolt is two-fold. While the playwright who creates the humor is clearly subverting authority, the audience who laughs at the situation presented before them is effectively demonstrating their discontent and frustration with the target of the choteo. As has been shown throughout this study, even when the target is a character

¹²¹ McGraw provides two detailed examples in his studies of Tanzania and Palestine.

within the play, the underlying message frequently gears the joke toward authority figures in general.

The three principal chapters in this study each prioritize one major cultural change that impacted Cuban society during that particular time period: social, political, or economic. However, it is impossible to completely separate these three components of cultural change from one another. While I have centered each chapter around one of the three, it is apparent that many of these plays address two or even all three of these cultural concerns in Cuba during these different times. It is important to recognize that these factors overlap and that, perhaps, by addressing one of them, it will affect the others. Using humor as a tool to address these situations can have various effects: it can allow people to escape, at least temporarily; it can simply serve as a means of critiquing a given situation; or it can draw attention to an issue and create the possibility for change.

As McGraw suggests, humor must find a balance. It must be both benign and a violation. Choteo in the theater can potentially create an emotional connection to the subject matter for the audience (the violation) while simultaneously creating a psychological distance by placing the situation in an imaginary world (the benign). The stage allows for the psychological distance between the real-life experiences of the audience and the on-stage experiences of the characters. By removing the context from their daily lives and having it placed on the stage in front of them, audiences can potentially find humor in things they might otherwise not see as humorous. Returning to Bergson's assumption that "the stage is both a magnified and a simplified view of life" (67), it is logical that comedy on the stage provides us with substantial information about life's realities. It is also capable of allowing the viewers or readers to remove themselves from the situation. If elements of real life are portrayed on stage, the humor in the story allows for the

audience to laugh at the other rather than at themselves. It allows the audience to believe that they have the freedom to change their situation even if they never choose to do so.

It seems undeniable that choteo has literary importance, and that is no less apparent in the theater, a form of both art and literature. If the precarity of each historical moment discussed in an individual chapter certainly played a major role in the distribution of each of these pieces, the specific production and publication conditions were the consequences of this precarity. Whether the issue was geographical distance (*El velorio de Pura* written in France), political dissonance (*El flaco y el gordo* and the possibility that the Revolutionary government was being criticized, *Manteca* and the fact that the government was unquestionably being criticized), or even the availability of paper for printing the plays (most literary works on the island during the 1990s), there were often multiple factors to be considered when it came to the production and publication of these plays. However, the one commonality for all nine plays is the use of choteo to relay criticism of the particular situations addressed.

Choteo's ability to offer contrasting perspectives to that of the dominant socio-political agenda is something that could potentially alter the national consciousness. The humor reflects not only the changes and variations that have taken place in Cuban society, but also those that should take place. Mañach saw a problem with the choteador's ability to laugh at all things, even those things that were generally considered serious, but I have sought to show how the intellectual choteador does in fact take seriously the object of his or her laughter. Because choteo is subversive, it may not be accepted by authority figures, but it is, more often than not, a response to the gap between the dominant Cuban culture and a Cuban culture with social, political, and economic diversity. By presenting contrasting perspectives, choteo in the theater opens up the possibility of discourse and dissent. While this may eventually result in long-term

changes, it is not surprising that the government and other authority figures would take issue with this theatrical approach.

In many instances choteo has been censored, one way or another, in the theater. This has been seen through the elimination of specific lines of dialogue, official state censorship, and lack of production or publication. The varying degrees of censorship or restriction have not curbed the use of this humor. If anything, it has fueled the way in which playwrights incorporate the humor. Luis E. Aguilar claims that “censorship does not destroy humor, it only drives it underground. For repressed people, it is a subtle form of rebellion; a collective means to pay back the oppressor; the last resort; the last laugh” (i). Aguilar speaks here of humor in general, or humor in many forms, but this clearly applies to choteo. Intellectual choteo has periodically been suppressed, but when moments of change occur that may cause a questioning of Cuban identity, it appears that it is stronger or at least more visible. The fall of Machado, the rise of Castro, and the fall of the Soviet Union along with the subsequent implementation of the Special Period were all momentous events in twentieth-century Cuban history.

Choteo is an attention-grabbing form of humor. But perhaps it needs to be followed up with a serious element if it is to initiate actual change. Returning to McGraw’s belief that one must “start with attention-grabbing jokes, then put all kidding aside and make your point” (54) and applying this approach to the use of choteo in the theater, it might, depending on access to the material, serve to initiate actual change instead of just a resignation to a particular living situation. It must blend the serious with the humorous. If a playwright were to address outright the problems in Cuban society during this time-period without the incorporation of choteo, it is possible that society at large could feel threatened, “but when you joke or laugh, you do more than just make those around you prone to laughter, too. Because humor helps you come off as

less threatening and more socially attractive, it can help convince others... of all sorts of unreasonable things” (McGraw 86). It is this persuading of others that is the goal of the intellectual Cuban choteadores. Choteo in the theater rides this line, but perhaps it does not succeed as often as it could. It does not always follow the humor with the sort of serious drive home that McGraw mentions.

When Is Intellectual Choteo Successful in the Theater?

Choteo in the theater has been successful, at least in the instances discussed in this study, in drawing attention to the social, political, and economic concerns of each of these momentous periods. Its purposeful integration into each of these plays acknowledges a need for change, or, at the very least, a reflection on the situations presented. It draws attention to marginalized types that have existed throughout Cuban history and criticizes struggles with authority figures.

Throughout Cuban history, there have been numerous instances of choteo in the theater. While not all choteo can be considered intellectual choteo, that which can stand out from the rest not only by serving to reflect the transformations taking place in Cuban society, but by calling for a need to advocate for further alterations to the current way of life. Intellectual choteo has the potential to encourage audiences to respond to cultural gaps and not simply resign themselves to their present social, political, or economic situation.

As discussed throughout this study, choteo in the theater exists in many forms. There are frequent examples of in-text choteo between characters. Sometimes this choteo is successful in achieving the specifications of intellectual choteo, however, in other instances it is simply a means of ridiculing another character. In all instances, choteo between characters serves as a way to assert superiority over the other and mock and belittle their supposed greatness. In some cases,

audiences may side with the choteador, but in the examples provided in this study, notably Cachita's choteo directed at Pablo in *La muerte del Ñeque* and el gordo's choteo toward el flaco in *El flaco y el gordo*, they are more likely to sympathize with the victim. These instances of choteo are not necessarily anti-authoritarian, nor do they respond to popular discontent other than to demonstrate where and how it already exists.

Choteo in these plays also exists between the playwright and the audience. Whether through the words and actions of the characters on stage or the cultural implications based on these words and actions, playwrights frequently call attention to the complacency that exists toward these real-life problems. Playwrights seemingly challenge audience members to reflect on the situation presented by creating a violation balanced with elements of the benign. While the characters demonstrate discontent and frustration, they do little to actively change their situations. I interpret this as a critique by the playwrights of Cuban society as a whole. Unfortunately, due to lack of production or publication, the majority of Cubans would not be exposed to these plays and would not even be aware of the mockery being made. For those in attendance, the call to change that I see in these plays might be missed completely, or may be ignored for any number of reasons, including fear of retribution, or feeling unable to help effect change in any way.

The final way in which I have evaluated choteo in these plays is on the level of choteo against authority figures. These authority figures vary from period to period but, in the plays, always hold some form of control over other characters. Whether those figures are individual characters in the play (e.g., Dr. Álvarez de Mendoza in *Y quiso más la vida*, Hilario in *La muerte del ñeque*, or Bururú in *Vereda tropical*) or more global (e.g., the men in *El velorio de Pura* or the Cuban government in *Manteca*), other characters question the control of those in command.

Even the specific characters that serve as authority figures represent more socially global authority figures based on social class, gender, race, political position, or a self-assumed moral compass. When the government sees itself as the target of choteo, it historically has not ignored it. While some of the playwrights in this study were actively censored by state mandate (such as Piñera and Triana), others were simply censored through lack of publication and production.

I suggest that successful intellectual choteo can achieve one or more of the following three goals: one, draw attention to the issues being addressed; two, create potential discourse on the issues; and three, move beyond simply reflecting the situation to effect potential change. All of the plays in this study meet the first requirement, without question. I argue that the majority of the plays in this study are able to do the second as well; however, this may not occur immediately due to publication or production delays. With the distance of time and the changing cultural conditions, it is possible that the circumstances that the plays address have also created a psychological distance. The third possible outcome I mention is effecting change. It is unclear whether these plays have been successful in achieving this, but they do allow for the possibility of such actions. The plays in this study rarely present a viable solution to the problems addressed and therefore cannot be considered instructions on how to effect change. But, I argue, this is likely not their goal. There is no one answer to how to change the national consciousness, so rather than offer only one possibility, the playwrights in this study often leave the path to change open to the spectator or reader's imagination. They establish a starting point for discourse on the issue at hand, but they do not promise a resolution. Even if this could be explained as not knowing what the solution may be, it can also be attributed to the idea that there are many potential answers to the questions posed in these plays.

Whether or not choteo is always successful in evoking change within Cuba, it is successful at bringing attention to the issue at hand. While the playwrights undoubtedly speak out against the dominant order and the complacency and resignation of the Cuban people toward the changing cultural conditions of these three historical moments, it is difficult to gauge if audiences actually take this information and attempt to change their situations. Narciso Hidalgo's analogy holds: "El choteo sigue funcionando como la aspirina, que sino resuelve, por lo menos alivia" (*Irreverencia y humor* 209). This parallel between humor and pain relievers correlates with the information found in the plays included in this study. Resignation may in some instances serve as a barrier that prevents intellectual choteo from effecting change, but it does, at the very least, bring awareness and attention to a situation that may otherwise be largely ignored. Intellectual choteo demands that spectators and readers laugh at their situation, but I argue it also proposes a need to adapt and change so that the situation can change. Choteo does more than acknowledge the situation, it challenges and responds to it in a way that may seem more palatable to most audiences than a serious approach.

The examples I have provided in this study do not seem to offer a clear solution, but they have the potential to create discourse on the subject. I contend that the primary reason that these plays were not successful in bringing about change is that there was difficulty in publication and production for many of the works. Humor in general is risky, but an anti-authoritarian humor is even more likely to encounter opposition. Whether the government officially censored the plays, or the precarity of the social, political, or economic conditions led to problems with production and publication, it is not surprising that these plays were not easily accessible to the Cuban

population at large. And, as Dorr suggests, the treatment of plays as something less than literature is also likely to have figured into the narrow distribution of many of these works.¹²²

Choteo has the ability both to resist change and to create change. It is my belief that the playwrights in this study incorporated choteo in these plays in order to create change. I see their messages as expressing how a resistance to change would only further serve to make the situation worse. Whether it is through the doctor in *Y quiso más la vida*, the capitalist government in *La paz en el sombrero*, or the hardline revolutionary in *Vereda tropical*, each period presents us with characters who resist change and shows how this resistance leads to their downfall in one way or another. Dr. Álvarez de Mendosa seemingly loses his reputation when he resists learning from newer and younger doctors; the Major and his cabinet are faced with a rebellion only a short period after winning a war and taking power; and Bururú breaks down after her daughter and granddaughter move out because of their ideological differences.

Some of the playwrights also demonstrate the need to question one's situation. This can be seen with Pepa in *El velorio de Pura*, el flaco in *El flaco y el gordo*, and Felipe in *El laberinto del lobo*. Although each of these characters questions something different, the inquiries and doubts lead to a seemingly more satisfactory life. Pepa appears able to move on more quickly than the other women in the room, el flaco finds a gratification (albeit temporary) in taking over the role of the former fat man, and Felipe does not seem to undergo the same sort of existential crisis that his friends do regarding their place in Cuba. He knows that it is a struggle to survive, but his examinations of both the socialist and capitalist models allow him to find satisfaction in creating a blend of the two as a way of surviving each day.

¹²² “Muchas veces las editoriales se resisten a publicar libros de teatro porque piensan que no tienen salida, pe[r]o [sic] en realidad no es tan así.” (Dorr, “Yo quiero” 45)

Many of the characters in these plays live in denial of their situation. While examples can be seen in almost every single one of the plays, the impact of this denial is most strongly felt through Don Juan in *Junto al río*, Hilario in *La muerte del Ñeque*, and all three siblings in *Manteca*. Don Juan rejects his role in the greater social world. His attempt to avoid any involvement in political matters backfires when he is in danger of losing his home. His resignation to being unable change to the world around him leads to his being a victim of the belief that he is better off dismissing the changes around him. Hilario's refusal to acknowledge his own faults leads to his downfall and death. He cannot see that his corrupt actions are the cause of the problems in his community and instead places blame on others. Celestino, Dulce, and Pucho are all in various degrees of denial about their situation, but when it comes to deciding what to do with the pig they have raised and now killed, they all deny the reality of their situation. The daydreams that they create regarding the plot of land and the candies they intend to make and sell are far from realistic given their economic situation. Similar to Bururú, they know that things are difficult, but rather than deal with the issues at hand, they hide in a fantasy world.

Those that are resistant to change or those that live in denial about their situations are most negatively impacted in these plays. Those that question or doubt their circumstances are more likely to create change. I maintain that the playwrights in this study blend these serious concerns with choteo in a way that would seemingly allow audiences to recognize the desire for change. A specific, realistic solution is rarely presented in these plays, and when it is, it is rejected by the characters. This suggests that the playwrights acknowledge that there is no one answer to the problems that they present. Again, the playwrights successfully incorporate

intellectual choteo by acknowledging important cultural concerns, but, without further action outside of the text or performance, that change will be difficult to achieve.

What Is the Future of Intellectual Choteo in Cuba's Theater?

From its origins in colonial Cuba to present day, choteo has frequently appeared in Cuban theater. While there have been changes in the rationale behind its application, and the target of the humor has changed as well, it remains a constant reminder of the Cuban desire to speak out against all authority figures. Aguilar, writing from before Cuba's entrance into the Special Period, confirms that "the Cuban sense of humor has needled authority from colonial to communist rule. It never was and never will be crushed by totalitarian repression. It remains the exception to absolute power" (i). This dissertation shows that not only is this statement true, but it continued to be true even beyond 1989, when it was written. Throughout the twentieth century, choteo refused to be suppressed. While it experienced periods of decline, at least in terms of published works, it never fully disappeared. Even when it faded from the stage, choteo continued to exist among the people. Aguilar explains that dictators have a low tolerance for political humor because they "understand that power is no match for ridicule, and they fear the challenge of a joke" (i). Though not all of the plays in this study are strictly opposed to their respective governments, they are critical of authority figures.

Choteo can simultaneously serve as a form of escapism and an opposition to the discourse of power. This allows choteo to stand apart from other forms of humor such as dramatic irony and slapstick. Choteo's connection with disorder and irresponsibility allows it to blend well with many forms of theater. Because it has never been a static humor, choteo easily adapts to the style and format chosen by the playwright. The plays in this study range from one-

act plays, to three-act *comedias*, to plays whose scenes number in the double digits. Choteo's malleability allows it to work with various theatrical formats. Considering this, it is logical that this Cuban humor will continue to thrive during the twenty-first century.

Nelda Castillo's 2016 *¡Guan Melón! ¡Tu Melón!* demonstrates the successful uses of choteo as a critical tool in the twenty-first century through its critique of the response to the influx of foreign tourists in Cuba.¹²³ This play flawlessly weaves choteo with tradition throughout the production through a seemingly exaggerated display of the Cuban tourism marketplace. Using songs, jokes, and sayings, *¡Guan Melón!* plays with words in both Spanish and English to emphasize Cuba's focus on international tourism. But, as Castillo explained after the opening night performance, there is very little fabrication here. The various displays of fodder for tourists in *¡Guan Melón!* are very much a reality. As I mentioned in my online review of the performance for *Words without Borders*, "the audience was laughing throughout the performance, but Castillo suggested that there was also an underlying resignation in their attitudes toward this production" (Salois). The audience laughs at the actions of the characters but also understands that these characters reflect certain elements of today's Cuban reality. The use of choteo in this play both acknowledges the discontentment with and the desire to change this reality, and simultaneously reflects a resignation toward it. Linda S. Howe alleges that "Castillo's abstract works prioritize gesture and painterly image rather than verbal expression" (45), and her assertion correlates with my position that choteo is more than just verbal. While much of the humor in *¡Guan melon!* is certainly in the words spoken or sung, the visual drives the choteo more than anything. Although I was unable to obtain a written copy of the text, I

¹²³ I attended performances during the opening weekend of its September 2016 run at *El Ciervo Encantado* theater in El Vedado, La Habana, Cuba.

suspect that much of the choteo in this play would not be as well received if it were not for the visual elements.

Nicolás Dorr has never shied away from incorporating choteo into his plays. Known as Cuba's youngest playwright, his first play, *Las pericas* was staged in Cuba in 1961 when he was only fourteen years old. The choteo in his 2011 one act-play, *La profana familia*, revolves around the relationships between four adult siblings and their mother. Some of the choteo in this play reflects the *jinetero* lifestyle that has become more prevalent in Cuba in the last few decades. Both Riri (the gay son who is possibly transgender, though it is never explicitly stated) and Raisa (the extremely feminine heterosexual daughter) are accused by other characters of prostituting themselves. The choteo between these two and from their other siblings is relatively harmless, but it does address the tourism boom as many of their sexual partners appear to be foreigners and the characters make jokes about traveling abroad. Dorr himself considers the play to be a "comedia realista" (Dorr, *Biografía artística* 7), and, as such, the incorporation of choteo is, not surprisingly, realistic as well. The criticism of the *jinetero* movement is not heavy handed in this play, and its presence exists primarily through choteo. Just as with many of the plays in this study, there is a blend of the serious with the humorous. The crux of the humor is presented early on and establishes the relationships between the siblings and their mother as one that is predominately positive. But when a family fight erupts over the impending arrival and introduction of the mother's new boyfriend, the humor is virtually non-existent. At the end of the play, the mother regains her smile and waves to the audience, assuring everyone that all will be right with the family. Her look also indicates a certain resignation; she knows that there will likely be problems in the future, but she chooses to ignore that in favor of a pleasant moment.

The expectant looks on her adult children's faces insinuate that adjusting to this change will not be easy.

Choteo as an element of live performance is alive and well in Cuba.¹²⁴ In addition to the more traditional forms of theater, one popular form of live entertainment is the *humorista* group whose acts often follow a sketch comedy format. These presentations often address contemporary concerns through the use of humor to live audiences. Two such productions that I attended while in Cuba during September 2016 were "Humor de afuera" by La Leña del Humor, and "Bajando que está nevando" by Kike Quiñones, Iván Camejo, and Grupo Pagala la Paga.¹²⁵ In both instances the *humoristas* depicted the intellectual choteo that I have discussed throughout this project. They were critical of authority and of their situation, but they also seemed resigned to that situation. In fact, in the production of "Bajando..." the resignation and passive attitudes of the Cuban people was a point of humor.

What does this mean according to Mañach's assessment? Mañach considered choteo an obstacle for cultural renovation and for that reason he was critical of the humor. One of my initial questions was to consider whether choteo could be used as a tool to bring about change or whether it was simply a way of avoiding a situation. In all of the plays in this study, a cultural concern was addressed. The theater served to draw attention to the problem at hand through its balance of humor and criticism. In hindsight, it is possible to suggest that the playwrights sought to challenge and make changes to their circumstances. However, there is no specific evidence

¹²⁴ Choteo continues to be relevant both in Cuba and in the diaspora. Cuban-American theater is often replete with the humor. *Milk of Amnesia* and *With What Ass Does the Cockroach Sit?* by Carmelita Tropicana and *Praying with the Enemy* by Luis Santeiro are just a few examples of English-language plays that weave choteo through their critique of the Cuban and Cuban-American relations at the end of the twentieth century. These plays, along with others that follow similar patterns, are best considered in a study of their own, but I felt it necessary to mention them here as yet another example of choteo's relevancy beyond the Special Period and into the twenty-first century.

¹²⁵ The production of "Humor de afuera" took place on September 3, 2016 at El Teatro Mella. "Bajando que está nevando" was performed on September 25, 2016 at El Teatro Karl Marx. Both performances took place in Havana.

that, at the time, that was the intention of any of these authors. But intention and effect do not necessarily correlate. In the instances where these plays were not performed or where audiences were limited due to the reduced production schedules of the plays, it is difficult to say what effect the play (either text or performance) had on the overall population. The lack of access to these plays by the majority of Cubans certainly affected the influence that these works could have had. If these plays had been performed widely for large audiences, it is possible that they would have had an impact on effecting change. Unfortunately, this remains unknown.

Choteo serves as a tool to deal with potentially traumatic changes during periods of cultural transformation, and it can do so in one of two ways: it can serve as a mere means of escapism, or it can (and this I believe is its underlying purpose) allow audiences to confront situations that need to be changed. While each of the plays in this study is considered through the perspective of the text and not the performance (with the exception of Castillo's work), I speculate that stage productions of these works would greatly influence viewers. As Laurie Frederik acknowledges,

Theatrical performance and artistic representation have provided a rich vantage point from which to look at how contemporary Cubans interpret and deal with crisis and social transformation, for dialogue, paradox, and contradiction can be found at every level of production, effectively reflecting the complexity of the larger situation. At the same time, as is well known among the artists themselves, crisis often drives creativity and gives social urgency and political meaning to art. (9)

Unfortunately, when the works are not actually produced nor widely accessible, this social urgency is lost. Although the written text may reflect the larger picture, the staged production would reach more people and have a greater impact. If people are not in attendance or the performance is shut down or cancelled for any reason (from blackouts to state mandates) before the public becomes aware of the work, the political meaning in the art may be lost, at least temporarily.

Moving Forward

Mañach had his opinions on choteo. And though he may have been the first to consider the humor in critical detail, he was certainly not the last. Contrary to his expectations, choteo continues to thrive in Cuba. Nevertheless, even today, many people are seemingly surprised when the humor is critically analyzed.¹²⁶ While there have been a handful of scholars who have considered the matter over the years, there have been very few Cuban *theater* scholars who have gone into detail about the use of the humor in the theater. Many have addressed the presence of choteo in the plays that they study, but they have not investigated the reasons why it was used. From this I have realized that there is much work to be done on the consideration of choteo in the theater. In this study, I have examined one particular use for choteo by Cuban playwrights, but my research is by no means exhaustive.

Choteo exists in the theater outside moments of critical change and it exists for reasons other than to critique authority figures. The plays in this study demonstrate how choteo can serve as a subversive and critical tool; however, there are many other plays with choteo that do not

¹²⁶ This was my experience in 2014 when I attended the conference on choteo in New York, again when I presented my preliminary research findings at the Cuban Heritage Collection in Miami in 2015, and on multiple occasions when I explained my research to Cubans in Havana in 2016.

meet this requirement. I have focused on three moments of intensive change in Cuba during the twentieth century; however, choteo can also be found in the moments in between. In an attempt to answer the questions about how and why choteo is used in the theater during moments of cultural transformation, I realize that there are many other questions that can be answered about the humor as well. How and why, for example, did playwrights in moments of relative stability incorporate choteo in the theater? Why are there so few published women playwrights on the island who utilize choteo during moments of cultural transformation? What are the differences between theatrical choteo on the island and in the diaspora, or between plays written or performed in Spanish and English? While this project begins to answer some of the questions about choteo in Cuban theater, it also opens the possibility for further research into the subject.

I have observed some of the ways in which intellectual choteo has adapted to specific calls for cultural change depending on the social, political, and economic situations faced by people living in Cuba at different times. It has served as a tool to demonstrate discontent and frustration with authority figures in various contexts. As that need has altered over time, so too has the approach that playwrights have taken to speak out about these issues. Whereas theater from the 1930s used choteo to present the social changes that were occurring and that were sought after, the theater from the 1960s no longer needed to serve the same purpose. The topicality of the political changes taking place in Cuba was more pertinent and, as such, is the predominant focus of choteo in the theater from the early years of that decade. And while there was a sharp decline in choteo apparent in published theater during the 1970s and early 1980s, a resurgence occurred in the early 1990s with the need to address the economic shift affecting the majority of the population. Even in the few examples from Cuban theater in the early part of the twenty-first century, the ever-changing agenda of intellectual choteo is apparent. Though there

are still elements of the social, political, and economic in these plays, there is also a specific focus on how the tourism boom has impacted life on the island. Each of the playwrights in this study has addressed a specific concern through the use of choteo in what I consider a call for change.

From my research, I have concluded that while intellectual choteo in the theater has been successful in some respects, such as bringing attention to the need for adjustments and potentially allowing for reflection about this urgency for change, it has been less than successful in other areas, specifically in effecting actual transformations around a particular cultural situation. I contend that the primary reason for this is a lack of exposure to these works. Since many of the plays were not widely staged or even staged at all, very few people would have been aware of the messages for change addressed by the playwrights. Issues of publication and distribution of these works have also played a part in the lack of awareness of many of these plays. I suggest that if the distribution of these works, either in print form or in performance, existed on a wider scale, the influence of these plays on the population would be greater, although, arguably, the degree of that influence remains unknown. Higher audience exposure to these works would allow for a more effective discourse on the subject matters that they present and support a greater possibility for change.

I contend that the lack of research on choteo in the theater, and intellectual choteo in general, stems from the stigma that the humor has retained for nearly a century. Mañach's consideration of choteo has had a lasting influence on the way that scholars have approached the humor. Seemingly, many people have taken Mañach's analysis at face value and have done little to expound upon it. Pérez Firmat and Hidalgo are among the few that have looked at choteo as more than simply a humor that takes nothing seriously and makes a joke of everything, although

neither critic focuses on the theater as a means of expressing choteo. The shift in the perspectives on this humor is relatively new, but appears to be moving in a positive direction. There is clearly a need for further research on the use of intellectual choteo in the theater, but the trend in dedicating more critical focus as to why the humor is used is an important first step.

Intellectual choteo in the theater makes a call for change and challenges audiences and readers alike to reconsider the social, political, and/or economic situations that they face. While this humor has not necessarily directly brought about immediate cultural shifts, I believe that it has the potential to aid in the ever-transforming face of Cuban society. Whether it serves as a mere form of temporary escapism or as a means to openly effect change, intellectual choteo plays a significant role in both mirroring and influencing Cuban society. It is my hope that this study plays a part in reinforcing a more positive perspective on the ways in which choteo both reflects and affects Cuban society.

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