Gender Nonconformity in Mexico: A Study of Community and Isolation in Carmín Tropical

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Recommended Citation
Arnold, Maddox, "Gender Nonconformity in Mexico: A Study of Community and Isolation in Carmín Tropical" (2022). Honors College Theses. 79.
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Gender Nonconformity in Mexico: A Study of Community and Isolation in *Carmin Tropical*

Introduction

From the very beginnings of cinema, many filmmakers have used their creative projects to create a mirror image of society in their films. One film that accomplishes this depiction with impressive accuracy is Rigoberto Pérezcano’s 2014 film *Carmin Tropical*, which is set in the town of Juchitán de Zaragoza in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The events of the film are driven by the murder of a *muxe*, someone with a feminine gender identity that lies outside of the male-female binary, and who belongs to the Zapoteca indigenous community (Ruiz Toledo 1). This story serves as a clear reflection on the incredibly high rates of violence against gender nonconforming individuals in Mexico (Transgender Europe). Although it is a work of fiction, Pérezcano’s work highlights a very real danger for the gender nonconforming population in Mexico. As it stands currently, Mexico is the second deadliest country for gender nonconforming individuals, despite having made recent progress towards the advancement of rights and protections for this population (Transgender Europe; Gómez). As such, *Carmin Tropical* serves as an important allegory for Mexico as a whole, and the dangers that gender nonconforming Mexicans face even as the country progresses. Pérezcano himself has spoken as to the importance of the film and its purpose in representing this danger, while also humanizing *muxes* and transgender people (Camargo).
One of the most compelling ways Pérezcano creates such a clear reflection of this aspect of Mexican society is through the stark juxtaposition of themes communicated throughout the duration of Carmin Tropical. Through a variety of techniques, including character development and reiterative motifs, among others, Pérezcano first introduces the theme of community and belonging, then sharply contrasts this with the theme of isolation, and the danger that is associated with becoming separated from one’s community. Thus, in his 2014 film Carmin Tropical, writer and director Rigoberto Pérezcano creates an allegory for the dangers of living as a gender nonconforming individual in Mexico through the use of the recurring and starkly contrasting themes of community and isolation. This dichotomy serves as an important reminder of how the issue of violence against gender noncomforming people remains relevant, even as certain states in Mexico are making progress in the advancement of rights for its gender nonconforming citizens.

Carmin Tropical opens with a series of photographs of Daniela, a muxe who was murdered in Juchitán, showing her progression through life from childhood to adulthood. We are then introduced to Mabel, another muxe and old friend of Daniela’s, as she discovers what happened to Daniela and returns to her hometown of Juchitán to investigate her friend’s death. Upon returning home, she is reunited with her friends and fellow muxes, and we find out she has been gone from Juchitán for a long time, having run away with her former partner to a city further north. It is also revealed that the last time Mabel saw Daniela was the night she ran away without saying goodbye, establishing a sense of guilt that Mabel carries throughout the film.

As Mabel investigates Daniela’s murder, she works with a local police officer, providing him with key evidence, and befriends a cab driver named Modesto. She finds photographs that were taken before the crime was committed, and interviews various people who may have clues
as to who the killer is. Eventually, Mabel develops feelings for Modesto, and the pair begin to spend more time together. However, after Mabel accepts an invitation to perform at a local club to rekindle her passion for singing, it is revealed that Modesto is Daniela’s killer, and that he plans to kill Mabel too. The film ends immediately following Mabel’s performance, with her and Modesto in Mabel’s hotel room, with only the audience aware of Modesto’s sinister intentions.

Pérezcano took an interesting technical approach to the making of this film, which starts as a crime documentary, changes into a drama, and ultimately ends as a thriller noir (Maza Pérez and Gerardo Frías 21). With an emphasis on the everyday life of its characters, the film has garnered attention as a faithful and accurate depiction of the muxes of Juchitán, and it was incredibly well-received upon release. The film was even featured at the Morelia International Film Festival, where it won the award for best picture (“Entrevistas FAHHO”).

Since its release in 2014, Carmin Tropical has earned a place in the glossary of queer Latin American cinema for its realistic portrayal of the muxe community in Juchitán. One 2017 article studying 12 LGBTQIA+ films from Mexico also applauds Carmin Tropical as a truthful depiction of the violence faced by the queer community in Mexico, emphasizing the harsh reality of the Mexican justice system’s abandonment of transfeminine people (Marquet 61). A second study, this one on the construction of queer characters in Mexican noir films specifically, corroborates this argument, while also pointing out the fact that Carmin Tropical succeeds in inspiring empathy in viewers towards the muxe victims in the film (López Pérez 47). These studies confirm that Carmin Tropical offers a multidimensional view of what it means to be queer in Mexico, while also mirroring the violence often experienced by the gender nonconforming community specifically. This provides the present study with academic support
of the authenticity of representation within the film, and initiates the conversation of exactly how the film fits into the social context of Mexico today.

It is important to acknowledge, as well, the contributions of other researchers who have analyzed Pérezcano’s work as the sole focus of their research. Two studies in particular examine Carmín Tropical, and their conclusions lead into the goals of the present study. In a study from 2019, researchers examine the strategies Pérezcano uses to reconstruct the memory of Daniela following her death (Medina Cuevas and Jiménez Arrazquito 128). The study connects the film’s use of photographs, interviews, and reflections on the past with the theory of collective and individual memory, specifically in how the characters remember Daniela. This study offers interesting implications that carry into the present study, in that it points towards Pérezcano’s intent on humanizing Daniela while simultaneously showing the unfortunate realities of living as a muxe, and by extension, other diverse gender identities. Medina Cuevas and Jiménez Arrazquito also call for further investigation of the reflections of Mexico’s anti-transgender tendencies, which the present study aims to achieve.

The second study of note examines how genre plays an important part in Carmín Tropical. Researchers argue that the film both upholds and challenges the gender roles of the film noir genre, resulting in interesting subversions of the expectations of a typical noir film (Maza Pérez and Gerardo Frías 9). This study also highlights Pérezcano’s respectful and humanizing approach to the representation of muxes in the film, and discusses how the film transitions between genres as it progresses, with underlying elements of film noir throughout. These elements become relevant in the present study, and warrant further examination through the lens of gender representation and how it extends to the reality faced by gender nonconforming individuals in Mexico today.
The present study aims to continue the important dialogue about how transgender and gender nonconforming individuals are represented in Mexican cinema, and *Carmin Tropical* provides an excellent opportunity to do so. By placing a larger emphasis on the gender identity of the film’s protagonist and her fellow *muxes*, as well as how elements of the film surrounding them correspond with or push back against their identity, the present study will provide a closer look into transgender cinema, and how it carries greater implications as to the lives of gender nonconforming individuals in Mexico today. In examining the themes of community and isolation, two concepts which are held close in the hearts of queer people around the world, the present study hopes to discover how a work of fiction such as *Carmin Tropical* can reflect such a clear image of Mexico’s stance on gender nonconformity and the dangers that gender nonconforming individuals face there despite legislative progress in recent years.

**Establishing a Community**

One of the prevailing themes throughout *Carmin Tropical* is that of the acceptance that one can find within a community. Pérezcano has confirmed that one of his goals was to recreate the atmosphere of tolerance within Juchitán towards the *muxes*, to demonstrate how a strong community can find acceptance and love towards those who are outside of society’s sense of normal. At the same time, he has also spoken about his intent to show the contrast between the acceptance found within Juchitán and the intolerance found in the surrounding country (“Entrevista Director” 00:45-01:16). While this may seem to serve as a mere backdrop for the events in the film, it warrants considering exactly how Pérezcano develops this community, especially in terms of how it relates to the transition from safety and community into isolation and danger, and the real-life consequences associated with this transition.
One of the primary ways the acceptance of *muxes* in Juchitán is demonstrated is through a lack of explanation of the *muxe* identity. This is not to say the film pulls back or shies away from admitting outright that the protagonist and her friends are *muxes*; instead, the film avoids trying to justify why Mabel’s identity is valid. Instead, she and her fellow *muxes* are presented as human beings, without need to explain who they are and why they are deserving of respect, and without their cisgender counterparts questioning their validity. The inherent validation of the *muxes*’ identities as a result of this confidence and the simple truth of who they are clearly communicates to the viewer that the community of Juchitán accepts the *muxes* without needing to question them. This confidence in the community of Juchitán sends a clear message to the audience that the muxes are an established and accepted part of their community.

Pérezcano also demonstrates the extent of Juchitán’s acceptance in the authenticity and variety of representation of the *muxe* characters. He worked with members of the Juchitán community in order to bring Mabel and her fellow *muxes* to life in the film, even sending José Pescina, the actor who portrayed Mabel, to learn from the *muxes* in Juchitán before beginning the filming process (Camargo). This demonstrates his dedication to achieving a realistic and respectful portrayal of the Juchitán community, thereby showing the audience what it is really like. Additionally, the portrayal of the *muxes* in *Carmín Tropical* shows that there is not one singular way to be *muxe*; that is, it allows for a diverse representation of gender expression. Mabel herself presents in a more traditionally feminine way, with long hair, carefully applied makeup, and feminine clothing, a style shared by Daniela as well. However, Darina and Faraona, two of Mabel’s friends and fellow *muxes*, do not externally express their gender in the same way; however, their identities as *muxes* are not challenged or invalidated as a result. This diversity in gender expression further shows Pérezcano’s aim of portraying *muxes* as they are in real life,
avoiding the use of stereotypes of transgender women and transfeminine people who are all too common in cinema. This freedom of expression for the *muxe* characters also shows the audience that they are safe and secure in their own identities, and that their community accepts them as they are regardless of how they present themselves. This further confirms to the viewer that the *muxes* are accepted into the community of Juchitán, and that they feel safe within that community to be who they are without filter.

The language used throughout the film also contributes to the strong throughline of acceptance within the community of Juchitán. For many gender nonconforming individuals, language is an extremely powerful mode of validation, but it can also be weaponized against them (2021 National Survey). In *Carmín Tropical*, the language used throughout the script is strictly validating towards the identities of Mabel, Daniela, and the other *muxes*. For example, it can be assumed that the *muxes* in Juchitán chose their names upon discovering their identity. However, the names they were given at birth are never revealed. This is especially important in regards to Daniela, who is no longer alive, and thus cannot defend her identity. Throughout the film, we see photographs of her childhood in order to honor her life. However, the name she may have used when some of the photographs were taken is never mentioned. Instead, she is simply Daniela, as she discovered herself to be. The same goes for the use of feminine pronouns; Daniela is always referred to using the correct she/her pronouns, even when photographs are shown of her childhood and adolescence, when her external appearance did not reflect the traditional expectation of femininity. This same respect is given to all the characters who identify as *muxes*, never relying on invalidation of their identity as a way to create conflict or tension. This gesture, though it may seem small, is a powerful indicator of the tolerance found within
Juchitán, because it shows that the community accepts the *muxes* without exception, and without question.

One scene of particular note in demonstrating how the community of Juchitán accepts the *muxes* without question comes when Mabel is visiting Daniela’s ex-boyfriend in prison, where he was placed under suspicion of having killed Daniela. Mabel is being screened for entry, and a masculine-presenting prison guard asks her to state her full name and who she is visiting, as well as her gender (see fig. 1). After providing the two names, Mabel states her gender as simply, “*muxe*”, to which the prison guard does not react (see fig. 2). Following this interaction, the scene cuts to a few minutes later when a feminine-presenting guard has replaced the previous one, and she continues the screening with Mabel. This subtle moment carries important implications: *muxes* are integrated into the community of Juchitán so seamlessly that there is no need to react when met with one. Additionally, the prison guards are respectful enough to pair Mabel with a feminine-presenting guard to finish her screening, further demonstrating the acceptance of *muxes* within Juchitán.

Another scene that speaks to this unquestioning acceptance into the community of Juchitán occurs in the club *Kinj Kong*, where Mabel and her friends are often seen, whether they are investigating Daniela’s death or simply passing the time. While the club itself is also a sign of integration into the community, with a large number of patrons and unapologetic expression of the *muxes* who work there, one moment in particular towards the end of the film speaks even further as to the acceptance of the *muxes* in Juchitán. The moment comes when Commander Rómulo, the detective with whom Mabel has spoken multiple times throughout the film, is seen drinking at the bar and watching Mabel’s performance at the end of the film (see fig. 3). His presence there as a police officer once again shows the degree of acceptance in Juchitán; often,
crimes against transgender and gender nonconforming people are misreported, or not reported at all (Balzer et al.), and so his attendance at Kinj Kong, as well as his willingness to work with Mabel in the investigation, should stand out to the viewer as a unique show of solidarity that is not often found among police officers in Mexico.

Fig. 1. Masculine-presenting prison guard. Still from Pérezcano, Carmin Tropical (00:37:37).
Fig. 2. Feminine-presenting prison guard. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (00:37:41).

Fig. 3. Commander Rómulo in the audience at *Kinj Kong* before Mabel’s performance. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (01:09:09).
In addition to the unquestioning nature of Juchitán’s community in its acceptance of the *muxes* who live there, one other way Pérezcano includes this motif of belonging within a community is through his handling of Daniela’s memory. Although the audience only knows her in death, the manner in which the other characters, and Mabel in particular, interact with and experience her memory presents her as an integral character within the story despite her physical absence. This cements in the viewer’s mind that Daniela was a well-loved member of her community, which implies that her identity and sense of self were also included and valued within that community. Medina Cuevas and Jiménez Arrazquito discuss this in terms of Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory, which posits that the memories of each individual within a group come together to create a shared, collective memory (Halbwachs 25-26). It is clear that each character who knew Daniela has their own individual memories of her, which they share with Mabel as she investigates the circumstances of Daniela’s death. The culmination of each character’s testimony, then, is a clear image of who Daniela was and what she meant to the people around her, and the collective memory of Daniela is then developed not only within the characters in the film, but within the viewer as well. This creation of Daniela’s character through her memory is tied directly to a sense of community; in fact, this type of memory depends on the existence of a community with emotional interdependence, which will then create and preserve the memory (Medina Cuevas and Jiménez Arrazquito 138). The viewer is even included within the group, giving them an idea of the inclusion extended to Daniela and her fellow *muxes* in Juchitán.

Daniela’s memory is also preserved via the use of a reiterative flashback sequence interspersed throughout the film. The scene depicts Mabel’s last night in Juchitán before she left with her partner, on the night of the *vela muxe*, a traditional celebration in Juchitán (Ruiz Toledo
The viewer sees Daniela in the center of a crowd, smiling and singing as she parades in front of fellow partygoers. Each time the flashback occurs on screen, a few more seconds are revealed, with the viewer not knowing what is being shown at first, and the full scene being unfolded by the end of the film (see fig. 4). The development of the scene is in line with Mabel’s time in Juchitán as the collective memory of Daniela is developed. The scene itself, however, also points to the strong theme of community for the muxes within Juchitán; not only does it show the town’s celebration of muxes, but the viewer clearly sees Daniela happy, surrounded by friends and fellow muxes, lit with bright lights and sparkling colors. This directly communicates the collective acceptance of Daniela, and by extension her identity as a muxe, for the viewers, showing them how accepting the community of Juchitán is for muxes, and the safety that muxes have in visually expressing their identities.

Fig. 4. Daniela during the vela muxe. Still from Pérezcano, Carmin Tropical (00:46:36).
**Shifting from Community to Isolation**

The representation of community within Juchitán is an important reflection of reality: it shows what is possible when everyone is treated with the respect they deserve, drawing the audience into the environment and showing them that possibility firsthand. However, Pérezcano then reverses the sense of comfort and safety within the community by introducing the motif of isolation, of Daniela and Mabel in particular, to show the dangers that still lurk outside an accepting community for *muxes* and other gender nonconforming individuals. The first, and most prominent, way this is accomplished is through another reiterative sequence included at many points throughout the film. In direct contrast to the motif of the flashback of Daniela surrounded by fellow community members, this sequence features Mabel alone, walking down the long hallway that leads to her hotel room, at times with her back to the camera and at times walking towards it. The lighting is darker and less inviting, and the only sound is the clicking of Mabel’s shoes on the floor as the camera executes a slow dolly zoom on Mabel, emphasizing her solitude and creating a sense of unease in the viewer (see fig. 5 and 6). This sequence is included throughout the length of the film with the camera at times closer and at times further away from her, even when Mabel is back among the Juchitán community, instilling in the viewer a sense of her lingering separation from her fellow *muxes* and cisgender counterparts, and physically isolating her from everyone around her over the course of the film.
Fig. 5. Mabel walking down the hallway. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (00:15:29).

Fig. 6. Mabel walking down the hallway. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (00:15:25).
In addition to the repeated use of the hallway sequence, Mabel’s character is frequently presented as separate from the rest, even from her fellow muxes. She is the only muxe among her friends who has left Juchitán, and she wrestles with the guilt of leaving throughout the duration of the film. However, she also speaks as to how her life took a turn for the worse after leaving home; she tells Modesto how the man with whom she ran away wasn’t who she thought he was, how he forced her to stop singing, and how she ultimately left him (00:58:00-00:59:05). In addition, the first time the viewer sees Mabel, she is working alone in a factory, apart from her coworkers, and she does not speak until she is on the road back to Juchitán. Her departure from the community in Juchitán left her alone, without her friends or family, and she ultimately lost her passion for singing along the way, demonstrating her inability to thrive outside of her community. However, even upon returning to Juchitán, Mabel remains isolated to a certain degree. Though she spends time with her friends and family, she continues to investigate Daniela’s murder independently, with her often shown traveling alone. On one of these occasions, when visiting the beach where Daniela’s body was found, the viewer even sees her call out to someone far away, trying to get their attention, but they do not hear her (00:17:15-00:17:45). Before this happens, as she walks out to the beach, Mabel again tries to get the attention of someone, this time the driver of a van, so she will not have to walk, but the van drives on, leaving her alone once more (00:15:45-00:16:05).

It is during one of these solitary investigations that she finds herself bonding with Modesto, Daniela’s murderer. Though she has spoken to him previously while in the company of Darina and Faraona, Mabel does not begin to form a relationship with him until she is alone in his presence. Thus, Mabel’s continued separation from her friends finds her in the presence of an outsider who harbors hate towards her and her fellow muxes, putting her in danger and ultimately
resulting in her supposed death. During another one of her investigative outings, Mabel is investigating alone in the motel room where the pictures of Daniela were taken before she was killed. She is alone, mirroring the isolation of Daniela, with the added tension of the fact that Modesto is the one who drove her there, and waits for her outside. In fact, from the moment the viewer learns Modesto is Daniela’s killer and that he plans to harm Mabel as well, Mabel is not seen in the company of her friends, further showing how Modesto has separated her from her community.

Mabel’s isolation only comes to a close when, at the end of the film, the hallway sequence finally changes. The camera switches angles within the hallway sequence to reveal Modesto, Daniela’s murderer, walking behind Mabel in the hallway. The change only happens after the viewer finds out Modesto’s true intent, and this confirms and amplifies the viewer’s unease, which grows into a sure sense of danger as Modesto is seen stalking Mabel (see fig. 7). At this point, however, it is too late for Mabel; she has been physically isolated from her community by Modesto, putting her in extreme danger. In addition, although Mabel is no longer alone in the hallway, the sequence of her and Modesto walking down the hallway and entering Mabel’s hotel room is interspersed with shots from Mabel’s performance at *Kinj Kong*. She sings a solo, with the camera quite close to her and unmoving as she performs alone onstage. Thus, even though she is in the company of Modesto in her hotel room, Pérezcano highlights the fact that she is still alone, as she performs a solo act.
In regard to the character of Modesto specifically, there is an air of separation that surrounds him as well, and the narrative techniques used by Pérezcano for the character further isolate Mabel before she becomes Modesto’s next victim. As mentioned previously, Modesto himself is an outsider. He is the only character to say explicitly that he is not from Juchitán, separating him from the other characters in the film. Additionally, the film’s narrative technique changes only after Mabel and Modesto go on a date. From the beginning, the viewer sees the events of the film from Mabel’s perspective, with a third person limited omniscient approach. This changes at the 1:02:00 mark, immediately following the date where Modesto has finally succeeded in isolating Mabel completely, as the perspective shifts from Mabel to Modesto. The viewer finds out that Modesto is Daniela’s killer, and that he plans to kill Mabel as well. From this point forward, the film remains in Modesto’s perspective, and Mabel is never shown in the
company of her friends, but rather in the company of Modesto alone. This change in point of view serves to further isolate Mabel, pushing her away from even the viewer as Modesto becomes the perspective through which she is seen, and putting her in extreme danger as a result.

Similarly, there is the suggestion of isolation that led to Daniela’s death as well as Mabel’s. While the memory and flashback of Daniela cement her character as an important member of the community in Juchitán, the evidence related to her murder tells a different story. The simple fact that no one can connect the crime to Modesto is, in itself, an indication that he isolated her from her community in a similar way to Mabel. However, the photographs Mabel finds in Daniela’s bedroom are telling as well, especially in terms of how they compare to other photographs of Daniela and Mabel shown throughout the film. Over the course of the film, Mabel reminisces on old photographs of her, Daniela, and their respective families. However, the pictures that were taken immediately before Daniela’s death feature her alone, and were most likely taken by Modesto. One of the photographs even included Daniela and Modesto, but Modesto cut his face out of the picture, leaving Daniela pictured alone once again (see fig. 8). This evidence also creates a feeling of isolation, this time for Daniela, as she was pictured alone before her murder, in direct contrast to the strong sense of community associated with Daniela’s character previously. Once again, Pérezcano uses this separation to show how Daniela was in danger as a result of her isolation from the larger community of Juchitán and her fellow *muxes*, which ultimately led to her death.
In addition to the characters, Pérezcano uses certain camera techniques to emphasize the feeling of isolation throughout the film. When Mabel is visiting the beach where Daniela’s body was found, for example, she is framed extremely close to the camera, with the ocean stretching in front of her and no other people anywhere nearby (see fig. 9). However, once she arrives at the empty crime scene, the framing switches to a much wider shot, emphasizing the emptiness around her (see fig. 10). This sends a clear message that she is utterly alone, especially with the scenery surrounding her: the expanse of the sand and the water gives the viewer a sense of enormity, and thus Mabel’s solitude in the wide framing, contrasting with the previous closeup, is all the more apparent. Alternately, when indoors, Mabel is often filmed extremely close up, with her head and shoulders taking up a large part of the frame. This more claustrophobic approach achieves the same effect. In these instances, the viewer can only see Mabel, and
nothing else, singling her out as apart from any others who may be present. One of the most pertinent examples of this occurs, as previously mentioned, during Mabel’s solo performance at the end of the film (see fig. 11). Although she is performing to a crowd of people from within her community at the club, the viewer does not see them. Instead, they only see Mabel and the lead-up to the crime to which she is about to fall victim. The camera remaining close to Mabel’s face, unmoving, isolates her completely from the people surrounding her, even as she sings for them. In essence, she is trapped, singled out and separated from them, despite sharing the same physical space, because the person she thinks of as she sings is Modesto, who has already isolated her from the group. The closeup framing drives this point home for the viewer, as Mabel is completely alone in the shot where she is meant to be reconnecting with her peers.

![Mabel at the beach](image)

Fig. 9. Mabel at the beach. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (00:17:02).
Fig. 10. Mabel at the beach. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (00:18:29).

Fig. 11. Mabel’s performance. Still from Pérezcano, *Carmin Tropical* (01:10:34).
A final contribution to the transition from community to isolation in *Carmin Tropical* comes in the form of the shift in genre seen throughout the film. According to Pérezcano’s own testimony, the film begins as a documentary, becomes more of a drama, then finishes out as *film noir* (Maza Pérez and Gerardo Frías 21). This creates an interesting transition in tone as well. At the beginning, Mabel is throwing herself into the investigation of Daniela’s murder, discovering more about her old friend and reuniting with others in the community. This all occurs with Juchitán as the backdrop, and as such, the audience is introduced into the community as Mabel is reestablishing herself. One of the strategies used by Pérezcano at the beginning to drive this home is a realistic approach. Mabel and her friends are shown doing everyday activities in real time, again drawing the viewer in and making them feel a part of the group. As the genre shifts, however, Pérezcano’s technical approach shifts as well. The viewer feels themself being pushed away as the lighting grows darker, the tension builds, and the danger Mabel finds herself in is revealed only after she has been separated from the group. The viewer finds themself cut off from the rest of the community in the same way as Mabel, as they are the only one who knows Modesto’s true intent, but without any way to alter the course of events. Thus, Pérezcano uses the shift in genre to first draw the audience in as an honorary community member, only to then push them away and highlight the danger Mabel faces after she has been isolated from the rest of the group.

**Putting the Film in Context: Gender Nonconformity in Mexico**

The juxtaposition Pérezcano creates in *Carmin Tropical* through this contrast between community and isolation is especially relevant in how it parallels Mexico’s attitudes towards transgender and gender nonconforming people today. Pérezcano stated in an interview that he wished to capture both the tolerance found within Juchitán, and the hatred that exists in the
surrounding country (“Entrevista Director” 00:45-01:16). As it stands, Mexico is the second deadliest country in the world for transgender individuals (Transgender Europe). Unfortunately, however, many deadly crimes against gender nonconforming people in Mexico, and around the world, are misreported; for example, the murder of a transgender woman might be falsely reported as the murder of a man dressed as a woman. It merits the question, then, of how a fictional representation of this very real threat against gender nonconforming people in Mexico, and against transfeminine people in particular, can shed light on how this violence comes about, and how society approaches the consequences of anti-transgender violence. This question is especially important as many Mexican states begin to pass legislation that advances the rights of gender nonconforming individuals, as one considers the contrast between this progress and the remaining challenges.

According to Pérezcano himself, part of the motivation for creating Carmin Tropical was the interesting dynamic of both tolerance and intolerance within and around Juchitán, as well as the desire to humanize the muxe community in the region (“Entrevista Director” 00:45-01:16). Based on his own testimony, he wanted to demonstrate this contrast between acceptance and rejection faced by transgender and gender nonconforming individuals throughout Mexico, and Juchitán is arguably one of the best choices to accomplish this goal. Since muxes are so ingrained into Juchitán’s culture, the area serves almost as a bubble of acceptance, where those who exist outside of the strict gender binary found elsewhere are welcomed with open arms. However, this does not mean that the muxes within Juchitán are immune to the violent transphobia that permeates the rest of the country, as Pérezcano demonstrates in the film. The way he communicates this binary of tolerance and intolerance to viewers via the themes of community
and isolation also carries real-life implications when one asks how these motifs are reflected in the violence against transgender people in Mexico today.

The idea of there being safety in numbers is widely known and accepted, and it is a simple conclusion that can be applied to the importance of community for transgender and gender nonconforming people around the world. When one feels accepted into a community, they feel safe. As mentioned previously, Pérezcano makes this apparent by demonstrating the *muxes*’ freedom of expression and lack of self-doubt or questions regarding their own gender identity. Isolation, then, can be used as a weapon to cause harm, especially when weaponized against someone belonging to a vulnerable community such as transgender people, and especially transgender women. It is widely known that isolation, and social isolation in particular, is a common method of abuse seen in intimate partner violence, and this method has been linked to anti-LGBTQIA+ and anti-transgender violence as well (Ristock 4, 8; Guadalupe-Díaz and Jasinski 3). Queer people of any identity are especially vulnerable to this abusive strategy due to their already marginalized status, given that queer and gender nonconforming people are already socially isolated from the greater majority due to their identities (Guadalupe-Díaz and Jasinski 3).

This method of perpetrating violence is demonstrated clearly in *Carmin Tropical* by Modesto in the way he plans the deaths of both Daniela and Mabel. He lures Daniela and Mabel away from the safety of their community and into the danger of isolation, taking advantage of their trust to commit his violent attacks. In doing so, he is complicit in the anti-transgender violence prevalent in Mexico, inserting himself into a vulnerable community only to isolate one of its members and cause them harm. López Pérez posits that Modesto is, in effect, fulfilling the country’s anti-transgender rhetoric by rejecting the existence of a gender identity outside the
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male-female binary in the most violent way possible, by taking the lives of those who hold that identity (46). And the way he does this is by isolating his victims, separating them even from their cisgender counterparts to isolate them and their identity, before robbing them of the ability to express that identity within their community.

In addition to Modesto’s actions, Pérezcano isolates the *muxes* in other ways that reflect anti-transgender violence in Mexico in his depiction of the police in Juchitán, who essentially abandon Daniela and her family in the pursuit of justice for her death. Their failure to investigate Daniela’s murder and find the identity of her killer is part of what leads Mabel to venture off on her own in order to investigate, and she herself has to bring key evidence to the attention of the only detective who seems to be remotely interested in the investigation. This mirrors the lack of police attention in Mexico when it comes to anti-LGBTQIA+ crimes, and especially crimes against transfeminine people. The sheer number of violent crimes against transgender people and the lack of widespread, accurate reporting of the crimes themselves speak volumes as to the lack of protections for the gender nonconforming community in Mexico, and the lack of police action against these crimes (Balzer et al. 9). In this way, the transgender community has been ignored and abandoned by the justice system in Mexico, further isolating them and pushing them away from greater society.

Finally, Pérezcano utilizes these strategies to show the danger that still remains for transgender people, even when they find themselves in a relative safe space such as Juchitán. Once again, Modesto is the primary method of communicating this idea, in that he is able to fool both Daniela and Mabel, pretending to care for them and accept them, and pretending to be a member of the community, before ultimately killing them for who they are. Once he has convinced them he is part of the community and separated them from the rest, as Marquet states,
“poco importa el grado de aceptación social del muxe, del fuerte tejido social en el que está inserto. Lo que ha cambiado son las estrategias del asesino” (“The degree of social acceptance of the muxe, the strong social mesh in which she is inserted, matters little. What has changed are the strategies of the murderer”; 62; my trans.). That is to say, once Daniela and Mabel are taken away from their community, once they are alone, they are no longer safe, and Pérezcano demonstrates this danger with astounding accuracy in how Modesto carries out their murders. His actions are not overtly hateful until he commits the murder, a crime he executes quietly, apart from the community that would reject such violence. This point in particular is incredibly relevant to Mexico as it stands today. In the past few years, the country has made progress in the advancement of rights for gender nonconforming people. As of February 2022, more than half of the states in Mexico have adopted laws permitting transgender people to change their legal sex without need of proof of medical treatment, and some regions continue to make strides in protections for transgender people beyond this law as well (Gómez; Berredo et al. 8, 14). However, this does not solve the greater problem at hand, since at the same time, Mexico remains one of the deadliest countries for transgender people overall. With this in mind, a film like Carmin Tropical, which shows both the potential for acceptance within Mexico and the dangers that remain for gender nonconforming people as a result of the prejudice against them, serves as an important reminder of the work that remains to be done, while also acknowledging the progress that has been made.

Conclusion

In the film Carmin Tropical, the juxtaposed themes of community and isolation, and the respective safety and danger that can be found within them, are developed through the use of respectful character interactions and diverse gender expression, language use within the script,
parallels in character development and reiterative sequences, a shift in narrative focus and genre, and camera angle. The presentation of these themes creates an allegory for the transphobic violence that prevails throughout Mexico today. These contrasting central themes serve as an important reminder for the future, as Mexico continues to make progress which protects and supports transgender and gender nonconforming people, yet still experiences worrying levels of violence against them. Pérezcano shows the dynamic between tolerance and intolerance and how that dynamic operates within Mexican society by establishing a community within the film, and then demonstrating how the intentional isolation of its members by those with sinister intentions can lead to devastating results.

As society in Mexico, and around the world, continues to shift in its beliefs and values surrounding gender identity and expression, it will be incredibly important to continue the discussion of media that represents people of diverse gender identities, and to investigate all the facets of such representations. The depth, authenticity, and motivations behind depictions of gender nonconformity in media, as well as the reaction to them, can reveal much about the status of gender nonconforming people in certain regions. Thus, as more media emerges that pushes the boundaries of the western male-female gender binary, further studies will be needed to draw connections between fiction and reality, both in Mexico and around the world. It will be especially important to highlight films are created by transgender individuals, both behind and in front of the camera, as their lived experiences will create even more authentic stories on screen. As the world grows more tolerant, and the film industry reflects this growth, one can hope that gender nonconforming creatives will become more involved in cinema.

More important than offering a source of academic study, however, the inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters in film provides the queer community with visibility and recognition on a
larger scale. As such, it is incredibly important that these portrayals are handled with care in order to create realistic and authentic depictions of the community. When faced with portraying an entire community of individuals, each with their own unique experience, we cannot risk pushing them further to the margins of society through carelessness in their representation. That is to say, a disrespectful and inauthentic portrayals poses the risk of further isolating queer people from the rest of society, which as we now know can carry deadly consequences. In order to avoid such carelessness, then, it is important to understand and accept the words of Mabel in _Carmín Tropical_ when she explains, “cuando se nace así, nadie lo puede a uno cambiar” (“when you are born this way, no one can change you”; 34:35), carrying forth the idea of respect and acceptance the queer and gender nonconforming community so deserves.
Note

1. This translation comes directly from the official English subtitles that accompany *Carmin Tropical* on Amazon Prime.
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