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Additional Information

# ANITA BERMEO'S TRANSMEDIAL ARTISTIC BIOGRAPHY OF HER PERFORMATIC CHARACTER 'LA TORERA'

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## Abstract

For the creation of the play “La Torera”, its author, Carmen Elena Jijón, collects fragments of Anita Bermeo's life to reconstruct the main character of the play. The proposal is articulated, together with the collective imagination, with press articles and multiple creations by artists from the Republic of Ecuador, becoming part of a transmedial biography of 'La Torera' that goes beyond the entire work and it circumscribes in an even broader transfictional universe. In this context, the present article manages to demonstrate a parallelism between the figure of 'La Torera' with the artist Frida Kahlo, placing both Latin American women in the performance field as pioneers in their different environments. In this way, Anita Bermeo's legacy as an artist is finally rescued, taking her character beyond the cliché and social prejudices of that time in Quito-Ecuador, which overshadowed her creation.

**Key words:** La Torera, performance, biography, theater, art, transmediality, transfictionality

## Introduction

This article is part of the research "Dramaturgy based on transmediality", which is being developed at the Universitat Politècnica València (2016). Its methodology is based on research into the creation of the theater play La Torera (2015), in which fragments of the real life of Anita Bermeo, who lived in Quito during the 1950s, are transited. The proposal reflects the meeting points between the collective imagination generated around Anita Bermeo by Quito citizens and other multiple manifestations of contemporary artists of the Republic of Ecuador inspired by her. All this becomes part of a transmedial biography of 'La Torera', which consists of a narration of the life of the character made up from multiple supporting documents, such as oral stories, press clippings and works of art. These same resources surpass the set of works that encompass and are circumscribed in an even broader transfictional universe, which configures the identity of 'La Torera' within what will also be a collective search that is part of the evocation of “ the residual images of the city, which now becomes a subject for theater and literature and that fiction imbues them with poetry ”(El Apuntador, 2018: 61).

Anita Bermeo was known in the city of Quito for her particular way to dress up; she used to walk around in fancy outfits; activity from which the nickname of La Torera came from. She hated it however, it was disrespectfully granted to her. Thus, she was compared for her appearance with the bullfighters who wear suits with lights in the bullring. However, even in her own context, little

else is known or wanted to be recognized about her, unlike Frida Kahlo widely recognized as a Mexican artist.

In this context, it is possible to establish a parallel between the figure of 'La Torera' and Frida Kahlo. For this reason, the objective of this research is to show that Anita Bermeo goes beyond the artisan work she does and not only constitutes a thematic reference for art in her country, but is also an artist, a precursor of performance in her medium, by analyzing the transmediality existing between her performance activity, the public stagings she makes, the photographs in which she appears, as well as the discourse that is generated about her and the traces of her life that are scattered in press publications, books and artistic works.

To support the reported evidence, the research picks as the main methodological reference the one used by Alfonso de Toro (2011) in his article 'The 'new meninas' or 'welcome Foucault'', in which he identifies the performance characteristics of Kahlo, the same that in this article they are compared with the traces left by Anita Bermeo, during the second half of the 20th century in the capital of Ecuador. In the case of Bermeo, she became a benchmark in the collective imagination for her public appearances that show a performance character. An assertion that can be corroborated by looking closely and in a similar way at what is analyzed in Kahlo: the photographs in which she appears, the discourse it produces about herself and the one it generates about her; as well as through episodes of her life, which have been documented mainly in newspapers and books; and, above all, in various artistic works.

In this way, their traces are scattered in a transmedial format and allow us to conclude that both, Frida and Anita, share a similar performance activity in their different contexts. Likewise, it is possible to establish differences in the construction they make of themselves as characters.

## **1. Anita and Frida, performing artists**

The information collected on the life of Anita Bermeo is articulated in a subjective biography of the character, which is confronted with the vision that de Toro (2011) generates about Frida. He rounds off his approach to the famous figure of the Mexican artist by analyzing the transmediality between her pictorial work and the performative activity that she maintains within the photographs in which she appears in her public performances, the configuration of her personal appearance, as well as, about the conscious discourse it generates about her life.

Transfictional theories have been proposed as a framework to explain and investigate transmedial practices. From this perspective, Vukadin (2019) considers transmediality a type of transfictionality, which extends through the media and platforms, connecting them through narrative elements or subject categories, such as characters, settings, or plots. In the case of Anita Bermeo, it is the oral tradition that mainly shapes the imaginary around her character, 'La Torera'. The same one that includes anecdotes that have been collected in reviews and newspaper articles, such as those on *El Comercio* (2009 and 2014) and *El Universo* (2013), two of the main media in the Republic of Ecuador; as well as through Freire Rubio (1988), a bookseller by profession and a profound connoisseur of the city, who publishes Quito, testimonies, traditions and nostalgia. Additionally, in the artistic field, her figure has been taken up by painting, literature, theater and documentary, configuring a biographical narrative of 'La Torera' in different supports.

Oral stories and the collective imagination contribute to the reconstruction of her history. They recognize the origin of her nickname, 'La Torera', in the fact that Anita Bermeo attracted attention for her extravagant way to dress. A name that bothered her terribly and that children or drunkards yelled at her as she passed by. To which, Bermeo responded by scampering them and, if she succeeded, hitting them with her umbrella or with the eucalyptus stick that she sometimes used to carry on her endless tours of the colonial town and La Mariscal, another traditional neighborhood of the city, where she circulated regularly. She was a woman of refined customs, apparently her origin holds several mysteries. It reaches the city from Baños or from Ambato, both small cities located on the south of the capital. She lived for a long time in the house of a high class family from Quito, where she rented a room, in front of the house of Count Jacinto Jijón y Caamaño.

A substantial feature of her construction as a character of the city, undoubtedly, part of the public stagings she performed on the streets of the capital using her striking clothing, as all the sources that existed around agree, and this will then be her main performance resource. Her clothing was characterized by being extravagant, colorful, fine; and, above all, from another era. It included wide-brimmed hats, sophisticated coats, quirky wallets, gloves, red stockings, ankle boots, all in strong colors. Being a seamstress was her role, that is, she had the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain, make or modify the garments with which she would carry out at her regular interventions, breaking with the daily life of the city, since she dedicated herself to touring the city by walking for hours in her flashy outfits. With a serious face, she led herself to be seen by those who looked at her.

This way of acting proper of Anita Bermeo coincides with what Richard Shechner (2011) defines as "restored behavior", that is, an inherent characteristic of performance, the same that contains a deep reflection, sense and consciousness, with which Bermeo enhances those that she would consider as possibilities for her being, beyond social limits. In this case, a similar attitude is recapitulated by de Toro (2011) when referring to Frida, on whom all eyes fell on starting from their clothing and accessories, describing their public performances as media.

Within the conscious discourse that they articulate, both are staged with particular qualities. In the case of Frida, De Toro (2011) refers to a fragment of the painter's Diary, in which she forges her image of a child prodigy. Well, although the text is written in 1944, the narrative of it makes the reader infer that it was written from childhood. Likewise, 'La Torera' contributes to the construction of her own character with statements about herself that feed the collective imagination, defining herself as the descendant of the Baron de Carondelet, a lineage that she claims to belong to, to despise those who offended her by calling her by its nickname. Again, Bermeo, like Kahlo, use this construction to become an artifact, as de Toro (2011) points out; that is to say, all these pieces are building the identity that they intend to construct.

Some of the anecdotes that the public shares with Jijón, after the first approaches to the character, are part of this same collective discourse and are being introduced in his dramaturgical work, such as the coffees that 'La Torera' drinks in the cafes of the historic center and of which she regularly leaves without paying and without anyone charging her a penny. Others, in which she publicly attributed herself as the owner of multiple houses in the colonial quarter that clearly were not her own. Finally, the testimony about the joy that characterized her in the nursing home where she spent her last days, which coincides with some scenes in the work. These stories go hand in hand with those collected in the newspapers, which recount how she dedicated herself to directing the city's traffic or examining the stones of the Plaza San Francisco for hours (El Universo, 2013).

Once again, her status as a performing artist is evident, since both, Kahlo and Bermeo, embody an art form that is found in the ephemeral, the popular, outside the museum and the theater, characteristics that de Toro (2008 and 2011) attributed to the Mexican painter, also linked to the use of materials from everyday life, in her clothing.

Additionally, it can be verified that both constitute a reference within the collective and artistic imaginary to which they belong. The figure of 'La Torera', in Quito, is comparable to Frida Kahlo in Mexico, since both embody the germ of performance in their respective spaces. Posture that, in relation to the Mexican, Alfonso de Toro (2011) postulates and that is applicable to 'La Torera', since the two use their "body as an artistic object in their daily life and in their interventions in public life" ( de Toro, 2011: 1). Like Kahlo, 'La Torera' is at the same time the construction of her own presentation, as a product and a medium. Both fit within Toro's (2011) conception, when he analyzes the links between space, time and the spectator that exist in the performance, when this does not necessarily have guidelines from which to depart, from the management of repetition and difference.

It should be noted that the presence of these two women is mainly limited to the fifties of the last century, while performance as such arose in the seventies, as a practice of creative and innovative artistic experimentation; which continues as a genre and field of study in the 1980s and 1990s, as Josette Féral (2001) recapitulates, in her text *What is left of the performance? Autopsy of a function: the birth of a gender*.

In the same way, it is possible to relate Bermeo's activity with a precise way of understanding the term performance, which will later acquire various uses. This conceptualization is synthesized by Diana Taylor (2011), in her text *Introduction. Performance, theory and practice*, when it condenses the multiple implications that this word will later acquire. The same one that is even closer to Bermeo than Kahlo, if one considers the peripheral character that the first artist embodies and takes it into account, considering that:

For many, performance refers to a specific form of art, live art, or art with action that emerged in the 1960s and 1970s to break the institutional and economic ties that excluded artists without access to theaters, galleries, and official or commercial spaces. of art (Taylor, 2011: 8).



**Figure 1.** "Fotografía interior del Café Modelo / Quito – Ecuador", Diana Chamorro, (2016).

The figure of 'La Torera', without a doubt, still has a recurring presence in the city center. Currently it is common to find several of her photographs decorating the cafeterias, for instance at Café Modelo (Figure 1). one of the oldest in the capital, in which her image is found after a series that captures buildings in the area at the beginning of the 20th century. Other photos are scattered

in the commercial premises of this same traditional neighborhood and some have been published in the press (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Anita Bermeo's Photography, "La Torera". *El Universo* (Sandoval, P. (2013, diciembre, 7). Barriadas de Quito evocan a la Torera. *El Universo*. Reached from: <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2013/12/07/nota/1881196/barriadas-quito-evocan-torera>).



**Figura 3.** Fotografía 'Anita La Torera'. CISEPP (Centro de investigaciones sociales, educativa, políticas y de publicaciones. (2013). *La Torera, personaje ambateño tradición quiteña*. Recuperado de <http://cisepp.blogspot.com.es/2013/07/la-torera-personaje-ambateno-tradicion.html>)

In both Figure 2 and Figure 3, we can see a woman who is proud of her appearance, even more if we consider that this photos were taken from the humble geriatric hospital where she died in the 1980s. Referring to Frida, de Toro argues that “the act of getting in front of a camera it’s a staging and performance act” (Taylor, 2011:10) and he focuses on two photos to address the use of the pose, such as the performance’s concreteness in the body’s action that enhances a new narrative. In 'La Torera', this argument can be confronted through the haughtiness and pride of her gesture, from where her image is build, between repetition and difference.

When comparing the construction of Frida Kahlo's and "La Torera" performative characters under the transmediality's prism, it can be seen that the transmedial supports created by the two performative artists are similar; whereas, the condition of artist has only been recognized to Khalo. The comparison is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** The transmediality in the construction of Frida Kahlo's and 'La Torera's performative characters.

	<b>Frida Kahlo as a performance character.</b>	<b>'La Torera' as a performance character.</b>
<b>Supports created directly by the performatic artist:</b>	Paintings Performatic pose for photographs. Public stagings. The discourse that she generates about herself.	Clothing Performatic pose for photographs. Public stagings. The discourse that she generates about herself.
<b>Supports that articulate or underlie with those generated by the artists for the construction of the transmedial performance character</b>	They exist but are not analyzed by Alfonso de Toro in his articles.	The Imaginary and artistic collective discourse around La Torera's character analyzed in this article.

Elaborated by: Carmen Elena Jijón, 2019

## 2. “La Torera” and the artistic story

Although her relationship with the plastic arts is not directly marked by her artistic work, Anita Bermeo served as inspiration for pictorial works of important Ecuadorian references, were Ramiro Jácome’s painting stands out (Figure 4). Who stands out in Ecuadorian painting at the end of the 20th century for capturing the city and its characters (Córdova, 2006). He portrays her in the “Plaza del Teatro”, with the “Teatro Nacional Sucre” behind her, thus linking her to the theatricality that 'La Torera' embodies and evidencing the attention that her presence aroused. In a future that could be summarized by Josset Féral's conception of theatricality (2003), which gives way to fiction built from an established reality.



**Figure 4.** "La Torera", Ramiro Jácome (2001). “*Cuatro siglos de transitar por Quito*” exhibition, Museo de Arte Colonial de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, Benjamín Carrión.

Jácome, almost literally, captures the performance activity of 'La Torera', placing her graphically outside the theatre and showing that it only requires its presence and those who look at it to break the routine, an image that is also close to Diana Taylor's concept (2011) about *the performance* and which Peter Brook (2012) poses about the theatre in *La puerta abierta*.

Memorable episodes of her life are part of the History of the Ecuadorian literature, in this case within Javier Vásconez's writing. *La carta inconclusa* narrates Anita's trip to California, where she goes as the housekeeper of a wealthy family from the capital, motivated by meeting a potential suitor who never arrived. As well as her statements on the public radio, where she confessed the Quito's high society love affairs that she witnessed on that same trip. After this live on air intervention, here apparent insanity was conveniently viewed as inconvenient and earned here the right to spend the rest of her days in a geriatric hospital on the outskirts of the city.

It is important to mention that the documentary directed by Christian Oquendo Sánchez (2014), *Cuidad de tiza, ciudad de lluvia*, has recently been released. In it, Vásconez details his relationship with 'La Torera', and tells how he met her as a child and how her figure influenced his aesthetic conceptions. These statements are particularly noteworthy, since Javier Vásconez is considered one of the most important storytellers in Ecuador today, whose work is characterized by the city as a fictional setting (Ruiz, 2002).

Anita's figure is also taken up by the performing arts, as pointed out by Genoveva Mora (2016) in her article *La Torera, un personaje de la ciudad*, within *El Apuntador*, the space for performing arts criticism with the longest history in Ecuador. In it, he points out that the character was a deviation from the social canons of the time and embodied a willingness to live his own way. Regarding the stage proposals around it, he points out that 'La Torera':

lives in a particular way in Valentina Pacheco's bodies -realist-, María Luisa González -romantic- and Carmen Elena Jijón -postmodern-. The first version appeared twenty years ago, the second eleven years ago, while the last one is a recently released work (Mora, 2016:23).

Subsequently, when addressing Pacheco's work, he praises his acting skills, giving life to the city's characters who generate and build the discourse on Anita Bermeo, linking the work to the collective imagination.

In María Luisa González' case, he points out that it is an approach to the character through dance that mimics her with the environment, by using video, to generate a game of superimpositions with the city. This vision can be complemented by what has been exposed in the press, where this creation is related to literature, since it's part of the poem *Quiteña Ilusión* by Ulises Estrella, a relationship that can be corroborated by the text by Manuel Chiriboga (2009). This montage also evokes the character's colorfulness, as well as her lack of belonging and social indetermination (Rivera, 2016).

In Jijón's case, what was exposed by Mora (2016) coincides with and is deepened in the article published months later in *El Apuntador*, which includes an article by Lorena Cevallos (2016) about the montage; as well as, with what was exposed by Ximena Curay (2017), in her master's thesis *Deconstruction of the Sign: Deconstrucción del signo: la huella como escritura en La torera de Carmen Elena Jijón*. The clearly established relationship between La Torera, the desire and the



social transgression that the character evokes, becomes evident, as well as the unpleasant confrontation with the audience that is generated on stage, which questions the constant aggression that Anita Bermeo suffered in the streets of a rather conservative city that shouted her "Torera" at her passing. Jijón's work, in turn, shows the need to contemplate women as political subjects, in a piece that escapes the anecdote and the official discourse and even allows the construction of a coherent fiction through a chaotic language.

With this goal, the fragmented use of the language and poetry, narrative and essay are identified. Curay (2017) identifies the footprint of Jorge Carrera Andrade (1979), who in the poem *Mujer*, shows possibilities outside the time conventions, whose lines are included in the work; as well as, the relationship with the narrative of Vásconez (2012), through *La carta inconclusa*; the textual questioning about miscegenation is made by including a direct quote from Gustavo Alfredo Jácome's novel (2000) taken from the text *Porque se fueron las garzas*. Finally, with references included from the essay by Ana María Goetschel (2007), *Educación de las mujeres, maestras y esferas públicas. Quito en la primera mitad del siglo XX*, in which it's evident how the education of women led by the church defines their behavior in the Quito's society of the time. This work by Jijón is also described by Fausto Rivera (2017) as a central part of his "poetics of madness".

Within this montage, Anita Bermeo's sensitivity and inner world are addressed and some findings about this woman's apparent imbalance are included. Among which, one in particular stands out. The same is attributed to an encounter with a bullfighter that, it is said, occurs in Ambato (*El Comercio*, 2009). It seems that he would come to the capital to look for her and marry her; however, he never arrives and this love disappointment affects her terribly. This fact contrasts with the story of the then capital student, Plinio López. Plinio confesses in his house to Carmen Elena Jijón and Edmundo López, in an unpublished interview when they are investigating the character, that he would have been the one who convinces Anita to participate in the "corso de flores", in which young women from Quito parade as godmothers, after gallivanting her for a short time (Figure 5). This participation, which was applauded by the streets of the city, was not spontaneous at the time, as several newspaper reviews indicate and as the newspaper *El Comercio* reports (2009).

After the interview, Plinio López gives a copy of this photograph to Jijón, who is then integrated into the play by his brother, Edmundo López, the play's set designer, and becomes the image for the dissemination of this stage work. The same as in one of its 12 seasons, it articulates with the performance of the artist Adriana Oña, created more than three decades ago, presenting both pieces at the same time.



**Figure 5.** 'La Torera's play poster, which includes Anita Bermeo and Plinio López (third man dressed as a bullfighter, from left to right), courtesy of Carmen Elena Jijón.

Like Anita Bermeo, the other artists mentioned in the article articulate the collective imagination with their proposals, all contributing to the construction of the character. It is worth mentioning that one of the characteristics of transmediality, as conceived by Jenry Henkins (2003, 2007), lies not only in the use of multiple media to generate a narrative, but also in the intervention of the receiver in content's generation. This characteristic is developed organically in the construction of 'La Torera', and according to the precepts stipulated by this same author, it is possible to consider that they enrich her as a character.

### Discussion and conclusions

DeToro's initial reflections on transmediality, in the case of Frida, focus on the relationship between her performance activity, on the one hand, and her photographs, her painting, her public performances and the discourse she generates about them, on the other. However, Fernando de Toro (2001), in his text *Transdisciplinarietà, semiología, transmedialidad: Los espectáculos transmediales en Alberto Karupel y multimediales de Robert Lepage*, identifies transmediality in the conjunction of diverse artistic languages immersed in the staging, which, although they come from different disciplines, are fused in the creation; an identification applicable to the creation of Frida and 'La Torera' as performative characters that are configured by means of a transmedial dialogue of diverse artistic languages by various authors.

When observing the comparison of Frida Kahlo's and "La Torera"'s performative characters presented in Table 1, we find that, in the case of Frida Kahlo, it would be possible to add to Alfonso de Toro's work, the analysis of the collective and artistic discourse existing around the popular Mexican painter; the same that, without a doubt, would contribute to the performative's character analysis that she initially proposes. Based on this analysis, it's evident that there is a need to broaden the investigation around the concept of staging Khalo's character, which, although it is the product of multiple media and artistic supports, has also been shaped by multiple voices and gazes; therefore we consider that through the methodological position proposed by de Alfonso de Toro, it is not possible to approach the character's transmediality from different perspectives, but from Kahlo's own vision. It is therefore an approach to transmediality that is exclusively inherent to the artist's proposal, but not to the construction of the character that is integrated into the

collective transfictional and creative imagination of Mexico. In the case of 'La Torera', this article proposes a transmedia biography of the character, which starts from the recognition of Anita Bermeo's performance activity and adds to the collective and artistic discourse of her environment; as well as to the collective transfictional memory of the city where she belongs; and, above all, recognizes the Ecuadorian creator Anita Bermeo as a performance artist.

In the future, we could expect creations by other authors related to La Torera's figure in other formats that feed the biography exposed and that exploit experiential facets of the character not yet investigated in the field of fiction.

Anita Bermeo's remains, a seamstress, as well as a performance transmedia artist, - rest in El Batán cementery, in the north of Quito, since January 11, 1984. Her memory continues to reinvent itself in the popular and creative imagination; rewriting the biography of 'La Torera'. Her character continues generating reflection and even innovative proposals, claiming her place in the city she questions to this day.

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## Photo Index

Source photo 1 - Figure 1: Diana Chamorro / *El Comercio* (Chamorro, D. (2015, agosto, 6). Los helados del Centro Histórico son los preferidos durante el verano. *El Comercio*. Recuperado de <http://www.elcomercio.com/actualidad/quito-helados-centrohistorico-preferidos-verano.html>)

Source photo 2 - Figure 2: *El Universo* (Sandoval, P. (2013, diciembre, 7). Barriadas de Quito evocan a la Torera. *El Universo*. Recuperado de <https://www.eluniverso.com/noticias/2013/12/07/nota/1881196/barriadas-quito-evocan-torera>)

Source photo 3 - Figure 3: CISEPP (Centro de investigaciones sociales, educativa, políticas y de publicaciones. (2013). *La Torera, personaje ambateño tradición quiteña*. Recuperado de <http://cisepp.blogspot.com.es/2013/07/la-torera-personaje-ambateno-tradicion.html>)

Source photo 4 - Figure 4: Exposición *Cuatro siglos de transitar por Quito*, Museo de Arte Colonial de la Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana, Benjamín Carrión.

Source photo 5 - Figure 5: Cortesía de Carmen Elena Jijón

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