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SONIC TEXTUALITIES IN TRANSLATION: THE INTERLINGUAL AND TRANSMODAL TRAJECTORIES OF THE MUSICAL PLAY *LA CAGE AUX FOLLES*¹

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Abstract

This study examines four versions of "I Am What I Am," penned by Jerry Herman for the 1983 musical *La Cage aux Folles*, a Broadway show notable for featuring two gay protagonists amid the conservative resurgence in the United States and the onset of the HIV epidemic. The analysis focuses on the composition and how the lyrics of the songs engage with discourses on sexuality. Employing a multimodal translation approach, this research underscores how the interplay between musical and linguistic

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systems, alongside the material elements of each version, facilitates the exploration of the trajectories of cultural artifacts in the shaping of queer imaginaries and archive.

Keywords: Theatre translation; Song translation; LGTB+; Queer; Drag queen.

Resumen

En el presente estudio se analizan cuatro versiones de la canción “I Am What I Am” escrita por Jerry Herman para el musical de 1983 *La Cage aux folles*. El musical de Broadway fue el primero en tener dos protagonistas homosexuales en un contexto de resurgimiento del conservadurismo en Estados Unidos y durante la emergencia de la epidemia del VIH. El análisis de las canciones se basa en su composición, así como en la manera en que las letras movilizan discursos sobre la sexualidad. Desde una mirada traductológica multimodal, la interacción entre los sistemas musicales y lingüísticos, sumados a la materialidad de cada versión, permite explorar la trayectoria de artefactos culturales en la formación de imaginarios y archivos cuir.

Palabras clave: Traducción teatral; Traducción de canciones; LGTB+; Cuir; *Drag queen*.

1. Introduction: the trajectories of *La Cage aux folles*

The musical *La Cage aux folles* (Herman & Fierstein 1984) premiered on Broadway in 1983. It is an adaptation of the play of the same name by Jean Poiret (1973), which was staged a decade earlier in Paris and later adapted into a Franco-Italian film directed by Édouard Molinaro (1978). *La Cage* tells the story of Georges and Albin, the owner and the star drag queen, respectively, of a nightclub in Saint-Tropez, on the French Riviera. Jean-Michel, Georges’ biological son, returns home to announce his engagement to the daughter of an ultraconservative politician and asks Georges to invite his biological mother to dinner with his fiancée’s parents, instead of Albin. When Jean-Michel’s mother is unable to attend, Albin takes her place, using his drag queen skills. The comedic farce unfolds throughout the dinner until Georges ultimately reaffirms Albin’s place in his life, challenging the traditional values of the fiancée’s family.

The musical’s Broadway debut followed a trial run in Boston, where its positive reception foreshadowed its success on the grand stage of American

musical theatre (Hart 2003). The creative team for this first Broadway production included Jerry Herman as the composer, Harvey Fierstein as the playwright, and Arthur Laurents as the director. Reflecting on the creative trio behind the musical, Stephen Citron wryly remarks:

That the triumvirate was gay was a bonus. Who other than three homosexual men could hope to write Broadway's first musical about a gay couple? (Citron 2017: 233).

However, as Fierstein (2022) notes in his memoirs, while the songwriting process with Herman was smooth, working with Laurents required concessions regarding the initial vision for portraying homosexuality—even influencing how protagonists Georges and Albin could or could not express affection.

The production of the musical skillfully “negotiated the border between its non-conservative, homosexual content and its mostly neo-conservative, straight audiences” (Hart 2003: 5). Or, as Ethan Mordden (2013: 234) suggests, *La Cage* transformed the gay experience from Wilde’s notion of “the love that dare not speak its name” into “the love that never stops singing about itself.” Through strategic production decisions—such as casting George Hearn and Gene Barry, two heterosexual actors, as the leads—and carefully planned publicity, the show modulated its homoerotic and liberal tone to ensure broad acceptance despite the neoconservative climate of Ronald Reagan’s America. The musical ultimately framed the conflict between liberal (Georges and Albin) and conservative (the fiancée’s parents) discourses as resolvable through a tolerant notion of family, emphasizing respect for both father and mother (Hart 2003).

While the commercial and mainstream media response was overwhelmingly positive (the musical ran on Broadway until 1987, with three national tours between 1984 and 1988), the brutal reality of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the United States elicited harsh criticism from the gay liberation movement. The primary critique centered on the perceived escapism of *La Cage*, choosing entertainment over political consciousness at a crucial historical moment (Frontain 2004). Fierstein (2022; Donovan 2023b) later acknowledged that the epidemic felt intensely personal, with half of the original cast succumbing to AIDS-related illnesses over the years. With

the revival of *La Cage* on Broadway in 2004 and in London's West End in 2008, and with the temporal distance from its original debut, the musical's reception can now be reassessed to better understand its role in LGBTQ+ visibility politics within Broadway history. *La Cage* occupies a transitional space among out musicals, following works that had previously featured coded or hidden LGBTQ+ characters (Thomas 2023: 11). Musicals like *La Cage* played a crucial role in shaping queer subjectivity and establishing a recognised link between queer desire and musical theatre representation (Miller 1998; Thomas 2020).

This case study intersects with both musical theatre translation and song translation. Historically, musical theatre has occupied a peripheral or “low culture” position—particularly musical comedies, which reflect modernity's transformations rather than inherent qualitative shortcomings (Platt & Becker 2013; Savran 2018). However, from a translation studies perspective, musicals reveal a fundamental tension between textuality, performability, and interlingual transfer, a challenge Susan Bassnett (Bassnett-McGuire 2014) highlighted in theatre translation. *La Cage* also provides a lens to examine the relationship between performance (as representation) and gender performativity (Butler 1990; 1993). Thus, analytical models for musical theatre translation developed by Franzon (2005), Carpi (2021), and Soto Bueno (2022) can be enriched by incorporating queer artifacts, wherein sexuality and gender play integral roles in the thematic and performative dimensions of musical pieces. As previously noted, *La Cage* has become a significant cultural artifact that has profoundly influenced representations of homoerotic relationships and counter-normative gender performances, particularly through drag culture. Examining the discourses on gender and sexual diversity that circulate through popular culture products allows us to understand how the globalisation of entertainment does not necessarily equate to normalisation, but rather fosters diverse forms of negotiation, where translation serves both as a medium of cultural contact and as a methodological key for interpretation (Baldo, Evans & Guo 2023).

In the context of song translation, this study aligns with cases identified by Şebnem Susam-Sarajeva (2020), which focus “on the travels of non-canonised genres across linguistic and cultural borders and the role

translations play in these travels” (ibid.: 352). The purpose of this research is to analyse the construction of narratives about homosexuality in the song “I Am What I Am” (Herman 1983) from *La Cage* and its four versions: “I Am What I Am” by Gloria Gaynor (1983), “Soy lo que soy” by Sandra Mihanovich (1984), and the adaptations in Argentine (Herman 1986), Colombian (Herman 1991), and Mexican (Herman 1993) productions of *La jaula de las locas*. The first of these versions can be classified as an intralingual club remix, while the other four align with the concept of an interlingual cover (Susam-Sarajeva 2019).

Regarding the structure of this article, it follows the general format of an empirical study. The second section outlines the methodological framework, describing the case study while proposing a postqualitative and queer approach through concepts from multimodality theory and the rhizome. The corpus analysis begins in the third section, where songs representing transgressive gender performances in *La Cage*, particularly through drag queen themes and practices, are explored in detail. This section also includes an analysis of the song “I Am What I Am.” The subsequent sections (4, 5, and 6) present a contrastive analysis of the intralingual remix and the Spanish versions, focusing on their musical and thematic dimensions. Section 7 revisits the main findings to develop a theoretical discussion based on previous research.

2. On methodological design and the construction of an “undisciplined” corpus

The fundamental design of this research follows a case study approach, a key method in descriptive translation studies (Tourey 2012). In alignment with this methodology (Yin 2018), the study is structured as a multiple or collective case study. This choice is justified by the need to analyse each of the five songs individually before comparing results to strengthen the theoretical arguments derived from the analysis (Chmiliar 2010). In this way, the research aims for robust theoretical generalisation—extrapolating theoretical insights to critically interpret other cases—while addressing the limitations of working with a single case study (Susam-Sarajeva 2001).

The cases, conceived as a collection of textual compositions assembled for research purposes, also constitute a corpus. Based on fundamental classification criteria, this is a bilingual corpus (originating from one English text and three Spanish texts), diachronic, non-specialised (Laviosa 2010; Bernardini & Kenny 2020), though clearly marked by its musical-theatrical dimension. These coordinates position the cases within a recognised disciplinary framework in corpus-based translation studies (Laviosa 2011). Beyond these classification parameters, additional elements reflecting the subjectivities embedded in the study's design must be acknowledged. These subjective components should not be mistaken for methodological or analytical biases but should instead be understood as integral elements of the research approach, such as cognitive empathy and attention to the heterogeneity of the research object.⁴ These considerations are particularly relevant in the context of the postqualitative turn, which critiques the closure of methodological innovation in favour of conventionally established and scientifically recognised methods (Krehl, Thomas & Bellingham 2020).

This collective case study can also be understood as an “undisciplined” corpus or an assemblage of texts, where the collected artifacts are linked not by statistical criteria, fixed social structures, or observable materiality, but by possibilities, contingencies, and queer experiences. Lescure (2023) developed the notion of “relationality” to explain how individuals establish relationships with other subjects and artifacts through various forms of eroticism—not in strictly sexual terms, but as an act of surrendering to the other in a sensual bond fuelled by passion and pleasure (Lescure 2023: 39). Thus, the sonic experience of musical theatre—explored by Miller (1998)—extends to the different forms a song can take and the ways in which audiences perceive and listen to music. These experiences vary depending on the performer—for example, a disco or pop diva (Jennex

4. Small & Calarco (2022) propose five criteria for qualitative literacy. Among these, cognitive empathy refers to the researcher's ability to understand the objects or experiences of other subjects based on perception, meanings, and motivations. Heterogeneity results from a rigorous process of empathy; it reveals the different facets of the studied object or artifact.

2013)—or the generic transformations of the song, from a theatrical composition to a disco track, and eventually into a pop version.

In this queering of methodological design and case selection, the diachronic relationship between the songs cannot be the sole determining link—a linear temporal connection in which the first song is positioned as the original text. Instead, the links are intertextual, understood through Kristeva’s semiotic framework, which rejects a logocentric approach (Kristeva 1986). Therefore, it is essential to consider that the songs analysed constitute a semiotic chain, understood as a process of transforming semiotic resources carried out by individuals or communities as an expression of situated agency and subjectivity (Stein 2008; Kress 2010). As a result, the relationships among these songs are not only temporal but also rhizomatic. The concept of the rhizome highlights multiple connections between heterogeneous artifacts, precluding binary or hierarchical outcomes (Deleuze & Guattari 1976).

Each song serves as a coordinate, an anchoring point—“fixing points” (Stein 2008)—or a site of stasis and stability (Newfield 2014).

These points of fixing contain the past, the present, the future. They are part of the chains of meaning-making, and in constant transformation as culture draws new materials into communicative processes (Stein 2008: 29).

The “space” or “interval” between each song can be interpreted as a “transmodal moment”—instances of change and transformation in modes of meaning-making that generate new texts (Newfield 2014). These transmodal moments are interpretative abstractions of change that highlight the production of new semiotic interactions and possible meanings. Both rhizomatic structures and semiotic chains provide useful perspectives for understanding the transformations undergone by the songs studied, not only in terms of their content but also their formal configurations.

3. “I Am What I Am”: homosexuality and drag

The character of Albin is described in the musical’s libretto as “a performer of star quality; mature; great powerhouse of a Broadway voice; fine comic actor” (Herman & Fierstein 1984: 13). Some of the description criteria

are quite clear, such as vocal quality—considering the Broadway musical tradition since the early twentieth century and Jerry Herman’s previous works—as well as age (“mature”). However, references to comedic ability and stage presence could be interpreted as indirect allusions to performing effeminacy and embodying a drag queen. These selection criteria were particularly relevant given that, as noted earlier, both lead actors in the original Broadway production were heterosexual. Furthermore, as an almost excessive consequence of this incongruence between representing a gay couple and the assimilationist strategy to market the musical, George Hearn, who played Albin, sought to desexualise his character in interviews about the show (Donovan 2023a: 129). Thus, the homosexuality represented in Fierstein and Herman’s texts was denied in the show’s publicity and production, ultimately contributing to *La Cage*’s commercial success.

A crucial tension existed between denying homosexuality and (re)presenting drag performance (as a radical form of gender transgression). As Arthur Laurents (2009), director of the first Broadway production, acknowledged in his memoirs: “I didn’t want to direct: drag turned me off” (ibid.: 115) and “drag in the theatre wasn’t to my taste” (ibid.: 116). While this stance was strategically aligned with the show’s mainstream success, Laurents’ attitude had real implications for performers who were actual drag queens, excluding them from a role they could have fulfilled despite the physical demands of the production. Ryan Donovan (2023a: 137) notes that the ten actors and two actresses cast were instructed to perform as drag queens not under the idea of creating a convincing illusion of gender transgression, but rather by emphasizing artifice and theatricality as entertainment.

Affirming homosexuality within the show, however, was Herman’s work as a composer. His tradition of diva musicals consistently included three components: the staircase number, the statement song, and the dramatic soliloquy (Frontain 2004). Each of these is represented by drag queens in *La Cage*, highlighting the centrality of drag performance to the musical’s structure:

- a. “We Are What We Are” serves as the opening number of first act, where the cast of drag queens display their dancing skills and the

elaborate production of their costumes. The gender play signified in drag (the act of dressing up) and the physicality of the performers (with moments of conventional masculinity emerging) creates a dynamic tension also reflected in the lyrics.

- b. Shortly after, Albin appears in his dressing room, mid-transformation, singing “A Little More Mascara,” his statement song, in which he explains how makeup and cross-dressing are essential to his identity.⁵
- c. “I Am What I Am,” which will be analysed below.

3.1. “I am my own special creation...”

“I Am What I Am” (Herman 1983) serves as the final number of the first act. Up until this point, drag performance has been established both as a craft (a know-how) and as an intimate act, imbued with subjectivity. According to Frontain’s (2004) classification, this song functions as the diva’s soliloquy, demonstrating her indomitable spirit while allowing the audience to witness the personal cost of maintaining such resilience:

The song marks a moment of self-doubt in which [the diva] rallies her spirits, even while allowing the audience to see the price that [she] pays for her optimism (Frontain 2004: 121).

The song consists of three verses, structured in a verse-refrain structure. In this model, the main message of the song is typically found in the refrain (a lyrical line that usually appears at the beginning or end of each verse and often carries the title of the song). Herman places the refrain “I am what I am” at the start and end of each section, engaging the listener through repetition. Due to this lyrical and musical repetition, the phrase becomes highly memorable for the audience (Perricone 2018: 183).

5. On this affirmative side, Fierstein is also present, having worked as a drag queen while living in Canada. “A Little More Mascara” is connected to a play written by Fierstein himself a few years earlier, *Torch Song Trilogy*. In its opening monologue, the character Arnold (based on Fierstein) is in his dressing room, preparing to go on stage, struggling unsuccessfully to apply false eyelashes (Fierstein 2022: 93). He then shouts for the audience to hear, “Just let me finish emasculating this eye and I’ll be right with you” (Fierstein 2018: 13).

The first verse begins at the opening of the song and ends at 1:16. It has a slow tempo and minimal musical accompaniment, making the performer's voice (Hearn) stand out. The second verse begins at 1:17 and ends at 1:56. This section has a moderate tempo with increased instrumental accompaniment. The third verse (from 1:57 to 2:47) is much faster and sung in a higher pitch.

The initial slowness of the first verse and the pauses after each word suggest the hesitation of someone who has been hidden for a long time and is beginning to reveal themselves. The lyrical subject timidly invites the audience to witness their world ("Come, take a look"—the phrase "my world" appears three times). In the second verse, the character begins to assert their identity without fear. As an interpretive technique, the singer shouts specific words ("praise," "bang," "life") and phrases ("I am what I am!"). The song reaches its climax in the final line of the last verse (the refrain). This intense moment is reinforced by the acceleration of tempo and the increase in musical pitch, building from the second verse.

The progression of the song from the hesitant beginning to its powerful finale is also visible in the 1984 Grammy performance by Walter Charles, who was Hearn's understudy in the original *La Cage* production. As Donovan suggests, this song and its televised performances "embodied the tensions inherent in the show's approach to performing identity" (Donovan 2023a: 238). The first two frames of the performance correspond to the first verse, where Charles appears initially resigned under the spotlight, reinforcing a sense of vulnerability. Hand gestures further convey insecurity in both his delivery and the message he articulates. The last two frames correspond to the climax of the song, where Charles, now standing with arms wide open, contrasts his initial stance, amplifying the intensity of the song through voice and tempo. The act of removing his wig, which will be analysed in detail in the next section, is performed forcefully, conveying defiance and exhaustion.



Image 1. Sequence of gestures by Zaza (portrayed by Walter Charles) in “I Am What I Am”

Lyrically, the metaphors about identity shift between the first and third verses. These metaphors originate within the theatrical domain. In the first verse, the lyrical subject is both the observer and the observed, requiring an external response to affirm their identity (“Give me the hook / or the ovation”). The agency of the drag queen is limited (“I am my own special creation”). In the second verse, there is again a reference to performance, but the drag queen asserts more talents and, consequently, greater agency (“I bang my own drum”). Here, the drag queen also embraces and acknowledges artifice as an essential part of their identity (“And so what / if I love each feather and each spangle?”).

3.2. “It’s time to open up your closet”

The lyrical elements of the third verse are complemented by the performer’s gestures. This section of the song incorporates metaphors related to gambling and money, signifying life’s uncertainty but also the importance of acting with confidence. A particularly significant line is “So it’s time to open up your closet,” which directly references the coming out process. Earlier in the song, pride is mentioned, which can be understood as a less radical counterpart to the identity politics of the 1970s gay liberation movement. However, the interaction between performance and lyrics reveals a critical moment of self-recognition for Albin as Zaza, the drag queen. The script specifies that at the end of the song:

Albin rips off his wig, throws it to George’s face, walks off the stage, down the aisle and out of the theatre. George is onstage, holding the wig, reaching out to Albin as the curtain falls (Herman & Fierstein 1984: 66).

In *La Cage*, removing the wig also reflects Fierstein’s own life, as he incorporated personal experiences into the script.

Performing at a club, I was ordered to take my wig off at the end of my act. It was the law. Law or not, I didn’t wear a wig. I had my own long hair. The manager shrugged; “It’s your ass,” and left me to my own devices. At the end of the second show, I bowed and exited the stage to find two policemen waiting for me. Luckily, they let me off with a promise to at least ruffle my hair as I bowed. [...] We needed a clever way to unmask Zaza as a man. I remembered that incident and wrote it right into the show. At the end of each production number the drag queens would line up, bow, and then remove their wigs to reveal themselves to be men. It became a routine in the show’s rhythm [...] (Fierstein 2022: 94).

However, Esther Newton (1972) documented that drag queens in the United States had already been using the act of removing their wigs in the 1960s. Newton’s ethnography describes this as a way to break the illusion of cross-dressing. In performances she attended, the contrast between masculinity and femininity was frequently highlighted. Once a drag queen had successfully convinced the audience, they would disrupt the illusion by revealing their true identity. Beyond removing their wig, performers would also take out their breast padding and show it to the audience: “A more drastic step is taking off the wig” (Newton 1972: 101).

Whether through Fierstein's personal account or Newton's ethnographic findings, this final moment in "I Am What I Am" and the climax of *La Cage's* first act serves a powerful performative function. Albin/Zaza directly confronts the audience, and removing the wig is not merely a theatrical gesture. In performance studies, Schechner (2020) differentiates between actions that create "make believe" and "make belief." The former establishes a clear boundary between reality and performance, while the latter intentionally blurs this boundary to create realism (Schechner 2020: 16). By the end of "I Am What I Am," the distinction between Albin and Zaza has nearly disappeared, making the drag queen a complex character who integrates both conventional masculinity (through voice) and femininity (through gestures and appearance). While the character delivers a message of personal affirmation, they ultimately appeal to the audience for tolerance and acceptance. However, by removing the wig, exiting the stage, and walking through the audience's seating area, the performance restores the separation between reality and theatrical representation.

4. Gloria Gaynor's "I Am What I Am"

Jerry Herman: "I Am What I Am," I know it's become an anthem. I know it's become a pop disco favorite. But to me, it will always be a cry for help, brilliantly delineated by George Hearn, alone on stage [...] (Herman & Bloom 2003: 227).

Gloria Gaynor released her version of "I Am What I Am" with producer Joel Diamond in 1983. Diamond had first heard the song while attending *La Cage aux Folles* on Broadway and subsequently produced a disco version, which he later offered to Gaynor.⁶ The song was released in both a 7-inch vinyl edition (3:51 minutes) and a 12-inch edition (5:54 minutes), with the latter specifically intended for DJs and club use.

Although stylistically a disco track due to its production elements, the song retains the structure of Hearn's version from *La Cage*. The verse-refrain

6. In Gaynor's words, "Joel Diamond picked me for that song. [...] He heard the song in the show, and right away got the idea to do a disco version of it—and he thought of me. He played us a version of what he wanted to do with it, and I thought it was a great idea. That's how we hooked up" (Arena 2013: 108).

format of the original three sections remains intact, with three additional sections added: a fourth verse (a repetition of the third), a musical interlude between the third and fourth verses, and a final section or coda.

The song begins with the first lines sung slowly and without musical accompaniment. Unlike the theatrical version, there is no gradual increase in tempo or pitch between the opening verses. This shifts the original process of lyrical self-affirmation—where the character progressively asserts their identity—into an immediate declaration of a defined identity from the first section. However, the repetition of the third verse suggests its thematic importance. Additionally, there is a slight rise in musical pitch during the repetition, reinforcing the intensity of the song. In the 7-inch vinyl edition, these tonal shifts occur at 2:13 and again in the final lines at 2:37. In the 12-inch edition, they take place at 3:23 and 3:47, respectively, with the timing difference due to the extended musical interlude.

The coda features additional lines:

I am, I am, I am good
 I am, I am, I am strong
 I am, I am, I am worthy
 I am, I am, I belong [...]
 I am, I am, I am useful
 I am, I am, I am true
 I am, I am, I am somebody
 I am as good as new

The semantic field of these added adjectives suggests arguments in favour of self-acceptance and destigmatisation of the lyrical subject, who—given Gaynor’s reception and the general cultural positioning of disco music—can be associated with the LGBTQ+ community. Through its disco resemiotization, “I Am What I Am” promotes coming out discourse and tolerance, shifting its performative space from the theatre to clubs and dance floors.

As a link in a semiotic chain or a node in a rhizomatic network, Gaynor’s version facilitates various queer relations. On one hand, it is connected to Gaynor herself, whose persona—as a disco star and diva—and the materiality of her voice had already acquired new layers of meaning with “I Will Survive,” released years earlier. That song had already explored

narratives of marginalisation and transcendence through baroque elements that emphasized Gaynor's vocal power and musical arrangements geared toward dance (Hubbs 2007). The interplay between performance, narrative, and instrumental elements oscillating between tragedy and survival also highlights the inherent incongruity of musical camp (Jarman-Ivens 2009). In a way, "I Will Survive" serves as an intertext for interpreting "I Am What I Am," not only due to Gaynor's discography but also because of its status as a disco anthem.

The act of dancing in a club derives from the popularisation of disco music in the Western context. However, solo dancing does not necessarily imply individualism; rather, it fosters collectivity in queer environments where dancers do not follow binary roles of leader and follower but instead move as part of a simultaneous, fluid exchange among bodies in motion (Lawrence 2011). Gaynor's disco version, in both its 7-inch and 12-inch editions, is longer than the original musical version (2:58 minutes). The extended duration encourages dancing and allows for different moments of mixing by DJs—for instance, the a cappella vocal introduction and the synthesizer interlude.

With its disco transformation, "I Am What I Am" migrates to new performative spaces—from the theatre to the club—creating opportunities for communal listening and dance. Both versions contribute to the anthemic quality of the song. The musical version, with its structural shifts and tempo changes, emphasizes emotional depth and invites audiences to use it as an expression of their inner experiences (Everett 2022: 73).

5. Sandra Mihanovich's "Soy lo que soy"

In 1984, the Argentine singer Sandra Mihanovich released an interlingual cover entitled "Soy lo que soy." She acknowledges that she first heard Gloria Gaynor's version at a gay nightclub in Brazil, where a drag queen was performing a lip-sync to the song (Various authors 2021). Despite this inspiration, Mihanovich's rendition aligns more closely with pop or Latin pop rock, genres in which she had already made inroads, in addition to ballads and jazz. This shift in genre and the decision to translate the lyrics into Spanish—despite the fact that she also performed in English—stem

from Mihanovich's desire for her audience to sing along and recognise the song as part of her repertoire.

Mihanovich has stated that it made no sense to replicate Gaynor's version by singing it in English (Various authors 2021). Nevertheless, her rendition retains the structure of the source song: four verses, a musical interlude, and a final section, similar to the disco version. Linguistically, the thematic progression in each verse closely mirrors the English lyrics (see Section 2.1). Applying Low's (2017) analytical criteria, the lyrical modifications in the Spanish version can be attributed to considerations of meaning—semantic accuracy—and naturalness, particularly Mihanovich's intent to adapt the song for Argentina's 1980s context. Formally, certain phrasing choices introduce structured expressions that do not facilitate singability (ease of vocalisation). Additionally, the Spanish lyrics lack the rhyming patterns present in the English verses. These differences highlight Mihanovich's interpretive abilities, as she successfully maintains the rhythm of the song despite variations in phrase length and vowel combinations in Spanish.

"I Am What I Am"	"Soy lo que soy"	Translation into English
Verse 2 I am what I am, I don't want praise, I don't want pity. I bang my own drum. Some think it's noise, I think it's pretty. And so what if I love each feather and each spangle? Why not try to see things from a different angle? Your life is a sham till you can shout —out loud "I am what I am!"	Soy lo que soy. No quiero piedad, no busco aplausos. Toco mi propio tambor. Dicen que está mal, yo creo que es hermoso. ¿Por qué tengo que amar según los otros dicen, tratar de entender las cosas de mi mundo? La vergüenza real es no poder gritar "Yo soy lo que soy".	I am what I am. I don't want pity, I'm not seeking applause. I beat my own drum. Some say it's wrong, I think it's beautiful. Why must I love as others dictate, try to understand the things in my own world? The real shame is not being able to shout "I am what I am."

<p>Verse 3 I am what I am, and what I am needs no excuses. I deal my own deck Sometimes the ace, sometimes the deuces There's one life, and there's no return and no deposit; One life, so it's time to open up your closet. Life's not worth a damn till you can say, "Hey, World I am what I am!"</p>	<p>Soy lo que soy. No tengo que dar excusas por eso. A nadie hago mal. El sol sale igual para mí, para ellos. Tenemos una sola vida sin retorno. ¿Por qué no vivir como de verdad somos? No quiero fingir, no voy a mentir. Yo soy lo que soy.</p>	<p>I am what I am. I don't have to give excuses for it. I harm no one. The sun rises the same for me and for them. We have only one life with no return. Why not live as we truly are? I don't want to pretend, I won't lie. I am what I am.</p>
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Table 1. Verses of “Soy lo que soy” by Sandra Mihanovich

In terms of semantic fields and thematic progression, Mihanovich’s version generally follows the development of the English lyrics. However, some modifications are particularly noteworthy for contrastive analysis, as they introduce innovations in the Spanish lyrics. Notably, Mihanovich’s version explicitly references an external “other.” For example, in the lines “¿Por qué / tengo que amar según lo que otros dicen?” (“Why do I have to love according to what others say?”), affective relationships (amar [to love]) are framed as a subject of external debate rather than personal choice. The rhetorical question reappears in the third and fourth verses as “¿Por qué / no vivir como de verdad somos?” (Why not live as we truly are?). This question replaces the closet metaphor present in the English version but still affirms an authentic subjectivity closely linked to self-acceptance. Section 7 explores the implications of this metaphor in identity translation, considering that Mihanovich’s version remains the closest to the English lyrics in semantic terms.

6. “Soy lo que soy” in *La jaula de las locas*

The first production of *La Cage* (*La jaula de las locas*) in Latin America premiered in Argentina in 1986, directed by Mario Morgan. Subsequent productions followed in the 1990s, including early adaptations in Colombia (1991, directed by David Stivel) and Mexico (1993, directed by José Luis Ibáñez). In all three productions, the Spanish adaptation of “I Am What I Am” was entitled “Soy lo que soy.” The Spanish versions closely follow the English model: three verses, a verse-refrain structure, and a progressively increasing tempo from the beginning of the song to its climax. However, interpretative differences exist due to variations in the vocal style and quality of the actors who played Albin/Zaza: Carlos Perciavalle in Argentina, César Mora in Colombia, and Javier Díaz Dueñas in Mexico.

Compared to Sandra Mihanovich’s version—which closely adheres to the thematic progression of each verse and remains semantically aligned with the English lyrics—the Spanish musical adaptations present a different thematic development. The Argentine and Colombian versions share identical lyrics, whereas the Mexican version features unique lyrics.

“I Am What I Am”	“Soy lo que soy” Argentina (1986) and Colombia (1991)	“Soy lo que soy” Mexico (1993)
Verse 1 Doubt in affirming one’s identity; reference to the construction of a personal subjectivity; little concern for public acceptance or rejection; choice of an enunciative position or personal development space with pride; recognition that life is valuable only when one ceases to hide and acknowledges their identity.	Doubt in affirming one’s identity; rejection of living a secret life; disregard for external approval; emphasis on self-respect and dignity; rejection of violence or external hatred; affirmation of one’s rightful place.	Hesitant affirmation of identity without concessions; desire to live without disappointing others for being different; call for others to witness, despite potential rejection.

<p>Verse 2 Disregard for external acceptance or rejection; celebration of self-identity; acceptance of personal traits, including effeminacy and theatricality; appeal for a shift in external attitudes; call for others to accept themselves.</p>	<p>Courage in self-presentation; rejection of the notion that all people are the same; disregard for external judgment; fear of violence or lack of recognition of dignity.</p>	<p>Self-affirmation of identity without expecting tolerance or compassion, despite external insults related to homosexuality; an attempt to attract attention to incite change.</p>
<p>Verse 3 Identity requires no excuses; courage and agency in different circumstances; the importance of embracing life and openly declaring sexual identity (closet metaphor); recognition that life is valuable only when one ceases to hide and acknowledges their identity.</p>	<p>Identity is an integral part of personal destiny; importance of persisting despite suffering discrimination; independence in life; exhaustion from hiding one's identity.</p>	<p>Unapologetic self-affirmation; learning from lived experiences; ignoring negativity while choosing to act with integrity; weariness from enduring suffering.</p>

Table 2. Thematic comparison between “I Am What I am” and the versions in Spanish of “Soy lo que soy” from the musicals in Argentina, Colombia, and Mexico

The three Spanish versions reinforce messages of affirmation—evident in the repeated opening and closing phrase of each verse: “Yo soy lo que soy / Yo soy lo que soy.” Generally, the thematic content supporting this affirmation is similar across all versions: identity as the foundation of one’s life and personal project. However, the path to self-acceptance is not linear, as obstacles such as shame, secrecy, public rejection, or condemnation emerge. In the English version and the Mexican adaptation, the second verse explicitly references theatricality and flamboyance as symbols of effeminacy and homosexuality (“So what / if I love each feather and each spangle?” and “Si salgo / con mis plumas / y mis lentejuelas” [If I go out wearing my feathers

and sequins]). This component is absent in the Argentine and Colombian versions. Moreover, the English lyrics introduce the metaphor of “coming out of the closet” in the third verse to describe openly declaring one’s identity. While the Spanish adaptations align with gay identity politics, this metaphor does not appear in any of the translations. This topic will be further analysed in the following section.

New themes introduced in the Argentine and Colombian versions include the idea of an identity that is not hidden (“Lo que yo soy no es un secreto” [What I am is not a secret] and “Sin ocultar lo que soy” [Without hiding who I am]), as well as affirmative actions of self-expression (“Muestro la cara” [I show my face], “Lo que soy es mi destino” [What I am is my destiny], “Apartarme / nunca más / de mi camino” [Never again will I stray from my path]). Additionally, these versions explicitly address external rejection or violence (“Pido respeto” [I demand respect], “No quiero / que me acusen ojos iracundos” [I don’t want to be accused by angry eyes], “Gente sin piedad” [Merciless people], “He recibido heridas” [I have been wounded]). The Mexican version also introduces novel elements, such as reacting to insults (“Aunque nos digan / maricones” [Even if they call us faggots]), as well as the potential for social change (“Quiero que las cosas / sean de otra escuela” [I want things to be of a different kind]). In the Spanish musical adaptations, rhyme and singability seem to have been prioritised over strict semantic precision.

7. Discussion: drag queens as translanguaging and identitarian mediators

The process of resemiotization of “I Am What I Am” can be characterised by examining medial and generic transformations. Although recordings of *La Cage*’s original soundtrack exist, theatrical versions are meant to be seen as live performances. The availability of video recordings on platforms such as YouTube allows contemporary audiences to watch performances from past decades, counteracting the ephemeral nature of live theatre. These recorded musicals—sometimes in fragmented clips, of varying quality—democratise access to the imaginaries of popular culture, removing economic and geographic barriers that limit access to live productions (Pietrobruno 2013). The transformation of “I Am What I Am” into

a disco version enabled it to be danced to, embedding its sonic materiality within collective, socially embodied experiences on dance floors (Garcia-Mispireta 2023: 127). The pop version, in turn, capitalised on the anthemic quality of the song and the decision to translate it into Spanish, making it accessible for audiences to sing along. Between the communal experience of radio broadcasting and the intimate act of listening through headphones, a pop song becomes a means of forging personal and social identity (Du Gay et al. 1997). The interlingual realisation of these songs (from English to Spanish) further amplifies the collective, social, and personal aspects of musical reception.

Beyond these transmodal trajectories, a persistent and critical link between the versions emerges: the drag queen. Over the past two decades, the drag queen, as both a concept and a performance form, has achieved global recognition, primarily through television productions such as the Drag Race franchise, widely accessible via streaming platforms. However, in the 1980s, the term referred predominantly to an Anglophone tradition of performance and entertainment. The drag queen replaced the term *travesti* used in the original French play and film adaptations of *La Cage*. The translation of drag queen into Spanish has been complex, with various lexical equivalents appearing across theatrical adaptations, dubbing, and subtitling (*travesti*, *transformista*, *raro*, *travestita*, *maricón*, *reina*). The term drag queen has now consolidated itself as an umbrella term encompassing multiple forms of transgressive gender performance. This linguistic closure, limiting alternative ways of imagining the disruption of gender binaries, reflects a monolingual and colonialist linguistic framework (Butler 2019; Khubchandani 2023).

Nonetheless, the drag queen should not be regarded as a totalising category. Its contemporary prevalence is the result of contingent processes that establish univocal signifiers or linguistic equivalences. A detailed exploration of these supposed equivalences is possible through contrastive or interlingual analysis, a core method in translation studies. Regarding the closet metaphor, for example, Spanish-language versions of the musical refer instead to autonomy (e.g., “Libre / siempre fui y yo elegí mi vida” [Free, I have always been, and I chose my own life] and “vives / cuando tomas buenas decisiones” [You live when you make good decisions]). As

seen in Mihanovich's version, these lyrics suggest an authentic subjectivity without necessarily invoking an explicit coming out narrative. This may stem from the fact that, as contrastive analysis reveals, identity construction does not require a specific discursive framework. Prior studies have shown that coming out and other closet-related metaphors are deeply rooted in a particular discursive tradition of LGBT identities and activism (En & En 2019; Wang 2021; Bassi 2017a; 2017b). While translating from an activist stance may sometimes be deemed legitimate (En & En 2019), the adoption of identity discourses can also result from generational and private processes, rather than from political activism or social transformation agendas (Wang 2021).

Regarding the songs we have analysed, it is essential to remember that these are products of cultural industries embedded in dynamics of reproduction and consumption. However, this does not diminish their capacity to inform subjectivities seeking to construct an identitarian repertoire. Translation, in this sense, even when performed for commercial purposes without an explicitly activist or gender-subversive agenda, always leaves an open gap between the source and target texts. In the case of coming out discourse, equivalent translations are not always viable across languages, as concepts of liberation and the possibility of livable or future-oriented lives depend on social, normative, and material factors that shape the decision or necessity to declare an identity (Domínguez-Ruvalcaba 2009). Such insights are only possible when questioning cultural artifacts that circulate relatively unchallenged as mere "entertainment" in public imaginaries. While Anglophone drag culture has become a reference point for different traditions of gender transformation and performance, it remains a contingent moment rather than a fixed endpoint. Beneath this dominant representation, multiple other discourses continue to exist in tension, carrying the potential for critical exploration from a translation and queer studies perspective.

8. Conclusion

Throughout this analysis, the cases studied have been connected not only through linguistic aspects but also through considerations of musical genre,

artist identity, repertoire, and the figure of the drag queen as a central axis in the crossover of the song to Latin America. These diverse connections reinforce the idea of queering the methodology, recognising the various relationships among the elements of an assembled corpus.

In today's context, various cultural artifacts, particularly audiovisual productions, are being re-edited, adapted, or recontextualised. These processes involve not only translation but also broader forms of resemiotization. For example, in remakes of animated films with musical components, new live-action adaptations reinterpret and retranslate dialogues and song lyrics for contemporary audiences. Future studies could explore how different discourses (on gender, class, race, and sexuality) have evolved not only due to linguistic shifts but also because of the voices of new actors and the technologies used in representation.

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