

A TRANS-AMERICAN DREAM: LUPE VÉLEZ AND THE PERFORMANCE OF TRANSCULTURATION, 1925-1999

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My dissertation on the Mexican actress, Lupe Vélez, represents the first Hollywood star study committed to a transnational, trans-cultural, and trans-temporal exploration of Mexican and U.S. culture industries of the twentieth century. As a Mexican woman achieving transnational star status without benefit of class advantage, Lupe Vélez is a singular figure of her era. My synthetic account of Vélez's life and work draws on archives of news and fan discourse produced in Mexico, Mexican-American Los Angeles, and the Anglo-hegemonic United States. For, as my project demonstrates, culturally produced images of the Mexican/U.S. border – which inherently involve (trans)national negotiations of race, class, ethnicity and gender – were constructed in the overlapping contexts of these three discursive spheres. Lupe Vélez, as my project demonstrates, was an embodied “contact zone,”² that is to say, her stardom came to signify the Mexican/U.S. border itself. Evolving as such, it is perhaps unsurprising that her stardom became a lightning rod for anxiety and contestation.

My study centers on the notion of *performance* as both a central quality of Vélez's professional craft and a concept through which to understand the industrial strategies underlying her representational deployment. Vélez's varied personae, I argue, amount to a set of industry *performances* of transculturation. Vélez herself was a unique, border-crossing trans-cultural product, having achieved star status on the stages of popular theater in Mexico prior to her career in Hollywood. Thus I mobilize the term *transculturation*, initially theorized by the Cuban Anthropologist Fernando Ortiz,³ with an emphasis on the term's double valence. That is to say, my project recognizes the distinct operations of – and the complex, sometimes irresolvable contradictions between – *intra*-national and *trans*-national functions of transculturation.

I trace Vélez's discursive footprint as she negotiates multiple cultural stages and three national cinemas. My analysis moves with Vélez from theater to cinema, silent film to sound, drama to comedy, A-movie to B-series programmer, traveling from Mexico to Los Angeles to Broadway to London and back to Mexico. Arguing the centrality of history and memory to star images and their afterlives, I track Vélez beyond her suicide where, posthumously, she would move through relative obscurity to emerge as camp emblem, then avant-garde muse and, finally, underground queer icon. Vélez's history is anomalous. Her many and varied talents, her tenacious commitment to fame, and her persistent performative adaptability, all conspire to render her case “exceptional.” Nevertheless, the categories to which she was consigned are often familiar. Ultimately, her image, on screen and off – articulated on the embattled twentieth century frontiers of nation, race,

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class, ethnicity and gender – testifies to the rigidity of each of these culturally constructed categories. For, despite Vélez's talent for crossing borders of nation, medium and genre, she was unable, I argue, to bridge historical borders demarcating social and cultural identities. Underlying her shifting, performative identities, these borders remain as powerful conceptual divides imposed by the industries and the nationally and ethnically inflected fields of reception that shaped her various professional personae. From my study, then, Lupe Vélez emerges as a quintessentially trans-cultural figure who was actively "included out," discursively and professionally, of every region she inhabited.

My project begins in post-revolutionary Mexico City, 1925. Vélez's stage debut, which featured parodic performances imitating the personae of her popular female star colleagues, launched a "fever of imitation" on the city's stages and led to Vélez's unofficial christening as "*la tiple* [female first soprano] 1925."⁴ Her celebrated notoriety incited the chagrin of those loath to see *la niña* Lupe – the young "jazz" soprano who, for many, represented a foreign-affected affront to Mexican national identity – elevated by critical acclaim. While Vélez was ultimately unable to defend her *tiple*-of-the-year nomination, her star currency was undiminished by the defeat: she was, I posit, the first celebrity *antagonist* to emerge within urban Mexico's nascent mass culture. One might even speculate her transition to Hollywood as having been inevitable.

My second chapter documents Hollywood cinema's sexualized romanticization of female ethnic difference in films of the 1920s, a dynamic that imaged the "eroticization of marriage"⁵ to compellingly articulate a "melting pot" American identity. The period held, for Vélez, a promise of assimilation – that is, a measure of potential U.S. cultural citizenship based on her "probationary white" status.⁶ But with the rise of nativist sentiment in the Depression years, the promise of inclusion was rescinded. Vélez's films of the early '30s enunciate a *racialized* image that discursively foreclosed on the assimilability of her (previously *ethnic*) difference. Discourses circulating within and between urban Mexico and Mexican American Los Angeles reveal nationalist tensions turning, as well, on expressions of gender and sexuality. Vélez's highly eroticized persona, cultivated in 1920s' Hollywood, is met with hardening borders on multiple fronts.

Theorizing an "immigrant paradox" structured by contradictory pressures of acculturation and cultural protectionism, Mark Winokur⁷ cites Samuel Goldwyn's famous supposed malapropism, "include me out!" as an adroit speech-act discursively performing the ethnic immigrant predicament. In Chapter 3, I appropriate Winokur's "immigrant paradox" to address the comedic persona that Vélez – working in partnership with (the vaguely "pan-ethnic") Jimmy Durante – honed on Broadway. Vélez and Durante return to Hollywood for three productions that rehearse the pair's mutually embattled stage dynamic. Crashing Durante's *Hollywood Party* (Charles Reisner et al., MGM, USA 1934), Vélez, playing herself, must fight (literally) for her cultural and professional citizenship. The racialized Vélez, I argue, was utilized to facilitate, by way of aggressive contrast, the cultural inclusion of ethnic personae deemed more assimilable than she.

Subsequent to the 1934 *Hollywood Party*, Vélez was almost entirely absent from Hollywood, until, that is, the World War Two era's federal/Hollywood "Good Neighbor Policy" (1939) saw the initiation of the *Mexican Spitfire* films (*The Mexican Spitfire* series, Leslie Goodwins, 1939-1943). I mobilize this series of "remarriage comedies"⁸ – which repeatedly stage the "problem" of a Mexican woman married to an Anglo man – to interrogate the neighborly partnership supposedly uniting bordering nations. Analyzing the trajectory of the series, I trace the economics of

the series's character relationships to document the "centrifugal force"⁹ that increasingly marginalizes Vélez's character. The films further strain Vélez's esteem within Mexican and Mexican-American critical establishments but do not appear to undermine her persistent personal popularity within her country of origin. Vélez's two Mexican films (*Naná*, Celestino Gorostiza, Roberto Gavaldón, 1944 and *La Zandunga*, Fernando de Fuentes, 1938) – which, as a pair, form a literal virgin/whore binary system – are jointly emblematic of the irresolvable position she occupied within Mexican national cinema. Among the heterogeneous population that Mexican cinema sought to consolidate, Vélez's star currency never seemed to fade.

My final chapter follows Vélez's posthumous representation, not in pursuit of her individual legacy but, rather, to illuminate the circumstance of her having no stable legacy. We have no point of access to Vélez's image in cultural memory, I argue, so occluded are we by the facts and fictions surrounding her suicide. Queer texts of the 1960s¹⁰ and 1990s¹¹ appropriated Vélez's Hollywood image within creative vehicles whereby normative visual and sexual economies of representation are turned on their heads. Even so, I argue, in death as in life, Vélez, as Mexican female subject, was "included out"; she was rendered remote within discourses produced for the cultural liberation of others.

- 1 Ph.D. dissertation supervised by Prof. Johannes von Moltke and Prof. Amy Sara Carroll. For information: krawson@umich.edu.
- 2 Mary Louis Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Routledge, London 1992, pp. 6-7.
- 3 See Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (trans. Harriet de Onís), Vintage Random House, New York 1947.
- 4 Jorge Loyo, "Lupe Vélez," in *El Universal Ilustrado*, July 18, 1925 (unpaginated).
- 5 Julian B Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2007, pp. 20-21.
- 6 See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1998.
- 7 Mark Winokur, *American Laughter: Immigrants, Ethnicity, and 1930s Hollywood Film Comedy*, St. Martin's Press, New York 1996, p. 60 and p. 180.
- 8 See Stanley Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1981.
- 9 Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*, cit., pp. 69-70.
- 10 Kenneth Anger, *Hollywood Babylon*, Associated Professional Services, Phoenix, AZ 1965; *Lupe* (Andy Warhol, USA 1966); *Lupe* (José Rodríguez-Soltero, USA 1967).
- 11 *The Assumption of Lupe Vélez* (Rita González, USA 1999).